

The Bloody Leash

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Nui has found a new loyal pet, and all it took was a few dozen beatings, several broken bones, and some Life Fiber assistance, but it may be only for a moment. The lines between them, master and pet, blur and change, and the leash between them is dyed in their blood.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2014-08-14

Updated: 2014-11-08

Words: 51869

Chapters: 15

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Tragedy/Angst - Characters: I. Gamagoori, Nui H. - Reviews: 15 - Favs: 13 - Follows: 16

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/10618426/1/The-Bloody-Leash>

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The Brand New Leash

"He makes a pretty loyal pet once you've beat him into submission, you know! Just gotta keep him on a tight leash!"

He heard her humming before he heard her footsteps, the sharp click ringing familiar in his ears. Although he couldn't move, bound and tied down by chains around his wrists, ankles, and neck, he tried to move away from the door. He knew why she was here, why she visited. It wasn't to bring him little food or water, which Hououmaru brought with little talk besides asking if he would be alright, and it wasn't to observe his behavior and simply stare at him, which Lady Ragyo did on occasion.

She came to him to beat him into submission, to break him of his loyalty and resolve. She literally beat him until he was bleeding, bruised, even broken. He knew she could simply stitch in Life Fibers around his mind to control him, but she continued with the brutal beatings up to this day. He expected no less in today's beating.

"Good morning, pet!"

He knew not to look at her. The last time he did so, she nearly broke his jaw with her bare hands.

"You won't talk now? Does your mouth still hurt from when I tried to break it?"

He raised his gaze only to her knees, knowing that she preferred him looking at her like an animal, like a submissive abused pet. He knew to play with her rules until he could not bare such insults and abuse.

"Come on, say hi!" she demanded, pulling his head up forcefully by his hair, her ice-cold hand holding his chin in place, "Say hello to me. You should be polite to your friends."

He kept the rude remark perfect for a rebuttal down, and carefully spoke. "Hello, Nui."

She smiled, dropping his head without warning. "There we go! I thought you were asleep for a moment, which is a shame but you scream louder when you're wide awake, so all is good."

She rounded him slowly, her hands never lifting from his skin. They dragged around his shoulders and back, a single finger never leaving his skin. Everywhere they touched brought ice through his skin, making him shake under the impossible cold. Such was an effect of being mostly Life Fibers; a cold that could never be warmed or thawed.

"Where to begin~, where to begin~?"

He tried to keep calm as she continued to poke and prod at areas, deciding where to start her torturous beatings. He tightened his grip on the cuffs on his wrists, silently praying that he would be freed before she found a way to break him.

"I know! Let's start by paralyzing you so you don't squirm..."

He gasped out his rejection of the idea as she violently pinched and poked at the base of his neck and spine, his entire body seizing and freezing until all he could do was breath, speak, and look around without moving. She patted the small sewing needles poked into precise points in his spine, and walked around him to face him.

"Now... when those needles start coming out, you will be in a lot of pain, because I'm done with waiting for you to break." She told him with cute voice, smiling afterward, "I'm going to break every bone in both of your arms, and let you feel how much it hurts after~."

"N-no... please, don't" He wanted to run. She never went this far. She had broken fingers, dislocated his shoulder,s but going as far as breaking everything in his arms had him fearing for his sanity.

She patted his head. "Nope. Lady Ragyo told me I have only through today to finish my work with you, so I'm starting what I want to do to you now. I think I'll begin with each finger."

She roughly grabbed his arms and detached the chains, but he knew that he would never feel the relief. She yanked his arm into a position she favored, hurting him and earning a whimper as the paralyzed limb snapped angrily forward.

"Eenie meenie Miney mo, which finger should be the first to go?" Nui snag softly, poking each finger until she fell to his middle finger. She took it in two finger, and snapped it back, instantly breaking it. He choked down the howl in his throat, and did again as she broke two more bones in his finger without looking up.

"One down, nineteen more to go~!"

He closed his eyes, and bit into his cheek. He needed to survive, to needed to not show weakness to her.

She did as she said, and broke three bones in every finger. She got him yelling and howling in pain when she broke his right thumb, only five fingers into the bone breaking. Tears were falling by the last fingers, and she quickly worked to swipe them away before running her hands up his right arm.

"Now how is breaking your arm going to work? There's so much muscle and fat, I don't think it's possible to, but don't you worry. I know how to break those fragile little bones."

"Nui, please... please stop this." He asked, his voice rough from his earlier vocal work. She looked up at him curiously. "This is no way to do this."

"Why should I? You need to cave to me first, then I'll stop and fix it all! Forget about Satsuki and everyone, and I won't break you anymore. Besides, this works well! So what shall it be?"

He went silent for a moment, as if he were actually debating both sides. Nui leaned around his body, trying to see his face through his guise of hair.

"Hm?"

"Never," he finally replied roughly, raising his head high, "I will never come under your rule."

Nui's smile grew brighter, her hands suddenly twisting his arm back, making him cry out softly as his shoulder slowly drew out of its socket. He tried to blink away the already falling tears starting to cascade down his cheeks. Her hands caressed his palm and wrists before returning to their places.

Her dark chuckle rang in his ears as she pulled his arm back behind him, snapping his shoulder out of the socket.

"Then I'll break you until you're nothing but a broken pile of limbs."

She loved the sight before her. Nothing but quivering limbs, and whimpers so sharp, scared, and frequent she couldn't help but smile so wide her cheeks hurt. She kept a count of how many bones it took for him to scream, for him to beg bloody murder for her to stop the pain. It was a satisfying session, and it hadn't even ended yet. The Life Fiber-based serum she coated the sewing needles with should slowly work its way up to his brain from the spinal fluids, effectively stitching his mind without the use of actual Life Fibers. She still had to wait to see if her work finally broke him to her side.

Every finger was broken in three places, his shoulders popped out of their sockets and bones down to the wrists either cracked or broken. She nearly started on his legs to add to the pain when she deemed it enough at the sight of his tears and the blood dripping on his lip as he bit down on it to stop from crying out. She pulled out the needles prematurely from their allotted removal time, all at once. The reaction was instantaneous, booming, and incredibly magnificent.

The scream he gave made her so excited for what he would do once he came to his sense again. It was a pure, bloodcurdling scream of unadulterated horror and pain. Every single pinpoint of pain fired all pistons at the same time, his screams so hard and powerful, those who worked guard near a hundred feet down the hallways could hear him holler for mercy. For the last hour, he screamed, yelled, panted and begged for an end to it all, his eyes rolling into the back of his head before he finally gave in, and slumped forward in a collapse. He collapsed after he had his last wind, allowing him a long rant, ending in rage toward her, going silent aside from the whimpers still escaping his bleeding lips. She knew she had him, but there could be a chance where he would still be fighting. She kept some distance from him if he found power to fight, which he had done in the past.

His head started to lift as his whimpers finally went silent, and she knelt in front of him. Her hand fell on to his head, fingers tracing little shapes into his forehead.

"Are you there, pet?"

He stayed silently until his raised his head enough to look her in the eyes. One look, and Nui knew she had him. He did not need to speak. She ran a hand across his cheek to test, and sighed when he nudged closer to it. She finally got him to break into her hands. She nudged his face toward her, smiling when he opened his eyes again.

"Welcome to my side, pet. You will be fixed so you can be useful to me."

He blinked wordlessly. Even though his eyes had gone completely blank white, she knew he could understand her. She undid the chains and cuffs on his arms and legs, detaching the chain on his neck from the wall. She didn't have the right leash for him yet, but it could be easily made. She kept a grip on the chain as she returned to his side, taking his broken right hand. Once sure he would stay put, she set the chain down, and began her work of fixing him, as promised.

"Who is your queen?" she asked, slowly re-breaking his bones, and setting them with quickly laced Life Fibers to accelerate his healing. He turned toward her, and spoke in a submissively soft voice.

"You."

She gave an appreciative pat on his shoulder. "Good boy. And who is the person to lead the Life Fibers to consume us all?"

"Lady Ragyo."

"You're a good boy! Now stay very still, or I'm going to break these fingers more."

She made quick process through his fingers, several times accidentally breaking an extra bone while trying to fix them. Setting his hands was easiest, the bones already grafting together as she moved to his arms. Before she did so, she rounded back around him to face him, and found tears slowly falling down his face, his attention directed at her hand on his right arm. She took the time to brush the tears away, reassuring him that what was to be done had to be done to ensure he could use them again.

He let her return to the job, and stayed absolutely still through the process save for the whimper he gave once she re-broke his left wrist, which she knew was a mess of bone from the loud cracking sound it gave the first break. Her last thing to do was pop his shoulders back into their sockets, which took some time because she couldn't get it aligned right or it wouldn't move. Once everything was taken care of, and Gamagoori showed signs of life, she walked around in front of him and smiled as he opened his eyes, more tears falling that were as easily brushed away as before.

"See? Wasn't too hard, right?"

He softly shook his head. "No."

"It will take a few minutes for your bones to heal, but we have that time to talk."

"Alright."

Nui titled her head slightly, swearing she saw a scowl on his face.
"Who is the enemy?"

"Satsuki Kiryuuin, and her foolish followers."

"And who is the pretty girl we want to take alive once we slaughter all of them?"

"... Mako-"

Nui did not hesitate to slap him, hard. His past infatuation with the annoying bowlcut pest would not interfere with her work. If she had to beat him to make him understand that Mako was to be eliminated, and in the most brutal way, then she would. She could break bones and fix them indefinitely if she decided to do so.

"Mako is to be killed. She is a pest in the way of what I want. Is that understood?"

"... yes, Nui." he responded submissively, rubbing his throbbing cheek before straightening up to his original place.

"Now who is the pretty girl we're going to take for myself?"

"Ryuuko Matoi."

Nui's smile brightened. She finally had her perfect, obedient pet. She reached up and gently undid the metal collar he wore, the heavy metal clanging hard on the concrete floor of the cell.

"Good boy. Now follow me, we have a lot to do."

Don't hurt me, I beg you.

Inspiration and credit to cover picture goes to artistictyranitar on tumblr; Credit: artistictyranitar]tumblr[com/post/94675679546/he-makes-a-pretty-loyal-pet-once-youve-beat-him (as usual, remove square brackets, add periods.).

I'm debating continuing this, but it all depends on you readers. Send a review and tell me how I did!

Minor Wear and Tear

He followed her step by step off leash, the sign of an obedient dog. She learned to trust him when she decided to cart him around without his special leash, and he in turn began to follow her orders without a moment's hesitation, almost bordering premonition on each task or job she assigned him. He would move quickly, hit or hurt enough to kill, and return at her feet, bowing at her in the most submissive position.

She liked to play with him as well, in all sorts of ways. Beatings, sparring, experimenting, even a few times she experimented in sexual pleasure. So far, she received every benefit from taking him in as a pet.

She did not have anything for him to work on, seeing that they were currently in prolonged silence between the rebel nudists, but she had an idea of what he could do to please her. She called for him as she paced quietly in front of an observation window, seeing down to the Academy's circular yard. Life Fibers shimmered in the sunlight of the day, COVERS flying around the transmitter tower still in the process of being built.

"You called for me?"

Her smile returned, and she turned to face him. She waved him over, and without a falter walked up to her, going down on one knee before her feet.

"Stand up, silly. No need for that."

He stood quickly, not bothering to bother about the dust on his knees. He stood to her side, and bowed lightly, keeping his eyes from her as he was taught. She liked that about him, but now did not call for such rules.

"Look at me."

His eyes trained on her before she could blink.

"I was hoping to get something from you. Shinra-Kouketsu is far enough along on that I got a break, and I can't go kill your friends yet. So..."

He broke into a smile, hand coming up to his chest to salute. She knew he had a feeling about what she wanted from him. She took her steps toward him lightly, unable to keep her thoughts completely clean. One hand glided around her waist as she reached up to him, giggling under her breath before her lips found his, an uneasy warmth spreading through her.

She did not do this to tease him or sexually frustrate him. She did not do this out of pure boredom. She did it because she felt something with him, something she couldn't entirely explain. The way he felt, the way he treated her, even under forced control, felt much like what Ryuuko did to her the one time they kissed. There was power, immense power. Not as much as Ryuuko, but close to what she hoped to feel. Such power, compassion, and anger each time she touched him and kissed him, it thrilled her to the prospect of what she could receive with her ultimate prize: Ryuuko. Until that day came, she could survive off of what he gave her, which was amazing to say the most she could about it.

She broke from him for the brief moment to lead him into the rooms behind locked doors, and couldn't stop the thrill knotting up her insides from building. She needed an outlet before she took it out on more important matters at hand.

She continued to feel uneasy, uncertain of something, after their trice pleasure. She was not used to it, and simply did not understand why she would feel like so. Everything was going according to plan. Shinra-Kouketsu was on track to be completed soon, Nudist Beach has been kept away and wounded greatly, and she had a far greater

pet then she hoped to have. The world would soon be nothing but Life Fibers, but still she felt uneasy.

She gripped the blanket she wore over her still nude form, her free hair blowing in the low wind from the open windows, the moon illuminating the still working COVERS in the night-covered courtyards. Was it because of her intimate time with him? Or maybe she simply did not push her wants of Ryuuko hard enough on to his image?

"Nui?"

Her uneasiness faltered. He had woken up. She looked over her shoulder to see him sitting up, not bothering with covering his bare chest. He looked worried for a moment about her distance from him; she usually stayed by his side after such things.

"Is everything alright?"

She smiled softly. So worried was the pet for its master. She took time to adjust her blanket cover and turned toward him, allowing him to see her backlit by the light of the full moon.

"It's all good, Ira."

She could see through the darkness enveloping him, spotting his smile and his offered hand with ease. "Will another round ease your mind, Nui?"

With his offering, her uneasiness took the backseat of her mind. She could consult Ragyo on her emotions later; she had one more thing to do with her pet. She dropped her blanket without hesitation, and took his hand as she climbed back on the bed, gladly accepting the kiss he offered.

He followed her quietly as instructed. She had used up her breaks, and now made her way back to work in the Life-Fiber covered

sewing rooms to continue her work on Lady Ragyo's ultimate Kamui. When the door came into view, she stopped and turned to him, twirling the handle of the leash in her hands.

"You can go relax or be useful somewhere else, okay? Just don't get into trouble or bother Lady Ragyo or me."

He leaned down to give Nui more reach to his leash. "I would never, Lady Nui."

"Good! Run along! I have work to do."

He turned to walk the opposite way as Nui disappeared into her work room, his hands already shaking. Clarity, composure, remembrance, freedom...

By the time he reached his place in the Academy, he collapsed against the door, and fought back against the Life Fibers buried into the cracks of his mind, keeping him locked down and under Nui's hand. As he finally pulled the strings loose enough to find freedom, his head exploded in a painful flash of memories, and he had to cover his mouth to keep from vomiting.

Under Nui's body, completely at her sexual whim as she traces pointless nothings into his chest as she looks lower, whispering her excitement as she climbed up his chest, sitting up as she-

What had he done? He wanted to burn everything on him and hope that he was reborn as far as possible from the frilly pink demon. What had she done to him to compel him to do such disgusting, faux-intimate things with her? He gave his body to her, he gave everything to her for pleasure, again and again, and his body had enjoyed it...

He needed to puke. He needed to throw away everything to keep his mind off of the disgusting acts he committed with her. He struggled to get into his bathroom before he emptied the contents of his stomach rather violently into the toilet, his legs shaking as the last

wave of bile came hacking out of his throat. He felt sick even where he lay, unable to lift his head as he collapsed against the toilet rim. The bathroom smelled rank, but it was a distraction from his thoughts. His horrible, disgusting, *disgraceful* memories that he wanted to burn away.

"You are surprisingly rougher then I thought! Mhm, it feels great."

"It is how I am. If you want me to be softer-"

"Ah! Ah, N-not at all. This... this is bliss..."

He reached up to her face, gently pushing away the tiny, tiny tears in her eyes and then grabbing her hips. "Then let me send you farther into bliss."

He slowly tried to calm down, inhaling and exhaling with increasing difficulty. His heart wouldn't be able to take much more of this... horrific betrayal of everyone he loved.

To Lady Satsuki for caving to Nui, for bedding with the enemy, to the rebellion for falling into Ragyo's hands so easily, to his fellow Elite for never returning after defending them to let them escape, to Ryuuko for failing to return after aiding in Nui's removal...

To Mako, for betraying his personal promise to save her and free her from enemy hands.

A fool, a disgusting, tainted fool he had become.

"Horrendous..."

He did not resist when his restraints fought back and returned into place, locking away his true, rational thoughts under the guise Nui had created. However, even back under the spell of Nui's Life Fibers, he stayed put on the bathroom floor. He flushed the remains of his stomach down the drain, and rested against the wall, tears long left unshed falling down. He let them roll down her cheeks, dripping off

his chin. He would not wipe these away, for they were his burning reminder of the horror that will always be scorched into his mind, body, and soul.

Never to be purged even in the hottest fires of hell.

She knew he broke through when she quickly evaded out of the sewing rooms. She could feel the hum of her Life Fibers as they lost control for the briefest of minutes, only to calm down when they found their place. She hoped that in the short time he found impossible freedom, he did not escape or free himself or anyone. She took her time getting to his room, and was shocked to find the door closed. He usually left it open to ensure he heard her commands.

Urging the door open, and quietly stepping inside, she found no evidence of him initially. Not a sound broke the silence engulfing the room, and Nui's uneasiness increased. She looked around each part of the room until she reached the bathroom, pushing the ajar door farther open. She did not like the look of the scene before her.

Gamagoori look drained beyond belief, panting as he lay against the sink cabinets. Bits of dried vomit lightly rimmed his mouth, his eyes bloodshot. His face was flushed with a sickly pink color, skin damp with sweat.

"Gamagoori..."

He didn't even look at her, much less realize she was with him. She knew the real Gamagoori would react badly, but becoming this sick over what she had done with her?

Vomiting, she expected, but the overall look of deadly sickness she did not. She knelt beside him and finally caught his attention, his eyes unfocused as they looked directly at her, normally a break in her rules ironed into him forgiven for now.

"Forgive me... for losing control." His voice was weak, his throat obviously roughened from the vomiting episode.

"You're forgiven, pet. Can you stand?"

"Of... of course."

She stood back, allowing him to get back on his feet, wiping away the sweat coating his forehead. He tugged at his collar, trying to find comfort in the heaviness of his body, and took to trying to relax his heavy heartbeat. She led him back into the main room, making sure he took the time to sit on his bed, and felt for the first time worry for him.

Another emotion she could not understand in the slightest. She let him rest, as he was not fit to help her as he should, but stayed within reach for some reason, unable to shake her uneasy emotions swarming normally calm mind.

She could pinpoint it almost to emotions of guilt, but she knew that was impossible. She would never feel guilty for her actions; she deserved to do everything she wanted, go wherever she wanted. She did not care what happened to others in her path, yet here she sat alongside her pet, feeling something about her actions upon him.

She reached out to his head, gently brushing back his hair from his forehead and making a split second decision. She played with the Life Fibers stitched through him, until she found the correct ones around the part of his mind containing his memories. She plucked one string, and watched the past hour replay in her mind. She saw nothing but Gamagoori's struggle against his binds, and his painful recollection of what he did with her. She felt his pain, his disgust, his horror, at every intimate moment they shared. She witnessed his sorrow, and every moment of regret, and fear, for his mistake of being captured.

She let go of the threads, and looked down at her now slumbering pet, not worrying about her prodding in his mind. Her uneasy feeling

doubled as the memories settled within her own. His disgust... his resentment. Everything he regretted about what she forced him to do with her.

She picked out the threads again, this time digging deeper to catch the thin threads that contained every moment where they touched and enjoyed each other, every intimate joining until she had a tangle of thin threads dangling out of the top of his head, wrapped around her fingers. One tug up and every memory that plagued Gamagoori's inner thoughts would disappear, their sexual experiments nothing but data embedded on to Life Fiber flash drives.

She did not want to dispose of him yet; he was still of great use. In that time, she would indulge in him many more times. It would be pointless to wipe their slates clean only to dirty it more and face this same decision once more.

She would wait until the moment was right. Before he perished and died in front of his friends, she would give him one peace. She let the threads recede back into their places, climbed off the bed, and made a move to leave him, only to look back once more in the threshold of his door.

She watched him sleep for a moment, making sure his chest moved as he breathed. She smiled softly as she closed the door behind her, letting him be as she walked back to return to her work.

"I'll show mercy right after your usefulness is all used, pet. I'll make you pay for what you've made me feel later~"

Extending The Leash

Her uneasiness did not go away in the slightest in the next days.

She had to replay them again to even shake the uneasiness within her. Lying on her side beside him, post-coitus with her hair down and covering her nude body, pulling at the Life Fiber strings containing their times together in bed. Each memory and moment they shared intimately calmed her mind and uneasiness, giving her a better moment of peace before she succumbed to it once again.

Whenever she looked at him, at most times, she grew uneasy and worried. Ever since the freedom incident and her sudden thought of giving him a peace before his demise, she could not shake it away as she planned. It got worse, if she thought back far enough.

As the replay ended, and her thoughts settled to normal, she moved closer to the slumbering Gamagoori and pressed a light kiss to his forehead without realizing, and immediately recoiling to her feet off the bed.

What was she doing?! He was an animal, her submissive pet with no word on anything she told him to do! Why would she dare show him kindness like that? She never did something like that, especially after screwing him. She did so to blow off some steam, to relieve some tension within her body, to remind herself that her prize was Ryuuko, and here she was actually kissing him with true emotion! She grabbed her throbbing forehead as her shoulders shook, anger and self-hatred boiling dangerously in her stomach.

She was not getting attached to Gamagoori. She was not feeling bad or *guilty* about her actions on him. She was not feeling something for him.

She sighed deeply to calm down the anger, and stared darkly at the sleeping form on her bed. She should punish him for making her feel

this way. She should break his arms again, and watch him suffer over and over as she repaired him and shattered them until he made her stop feeling for him. She should bring him in front of his loved ones, and slit his throat in front of them. She could bring him to Lady Ragyo, and they could torture him by shoving Life Fibers into his body, and watch him be torn to pieces by the alien threads. She should-!

He mumbled in his sleep, breaking her from her dark thoughts, turning toward her with the Life Fibers still resting against his forehead. She had not made them recede back into place. She quickly returned to his side and snagged the strings before they were snapped by his unpredictable tossing. She sighed when he finally settled in place, and she replaced the Life Fibers to their original places. She slid back his hair from his face, and took time to look over his peaceful expression and gently blush-covered cheeks.

Something propelled her to stay there. She could take out her anger on someone else. She needed him intact for the moment. She look around for a moment, and pressed one more genuine kiss to his lips.

Maybe there was a reason she was feeling like this?

He was an amazing fighter when unleashed on the enemy, vicious, unnerving, and bloody. When she decided to finally test his potential, she had some minions make up a course in the largely unfinished basement, and she could deal with what they created. They could have done much better, made it more realistic or created it to mirror areas of the town, but it was enough to test Gamagoori for the first time.

"Okay, that will do. Gamagoori!" She called him, looking over her shoulder to find him there at her signal, hands folded behind him as he bowed for a moment.

"I'll be watching you run this thing. You can use it in any way, and do practically anything, but you have to kill every last enemy before

you'll be let out of here. Understood?"

"Yes, Lady Nui." he responded, giving her a quick smile before going to the spot Nui pointed him toward, turning to face her as she sauntered off the course, heading to the upstairs observatory to watch him maul his way to freedom. Over on the other side, she could see Lady Ragyo's faint glow, and everything changed quickly. She was evaluating him, and her ability to use him. This would most likely make or break her, and save or skin him. She redirected her attention back to her pet, knowing well that he would succeed in proving himself to their Queen.

Nui pushed the big red button before her, and the animatronic men slowly rose up in their positions on the floor. A temporary shield enclosed Gamagoori as a fifteen second counter above them counted down.

"Ready, my pet?" she asked through the PA system, smiling down at him. Time continued to count down as he took a fighting stance, not bothering with looking at her but instead at his foes.

"Absolutely."

'Four, three, two, one... engage hostiles.'

She didn't blink through the entire thing, not wanting to miss a moment as Gamagoori literally shredded through enemies firing rubber bullets at him, sending shock waves through Life Fiber weapons, and engaging him in hand-to-hand combat. Blood and robotic parts littered the combat sim floor as he tore through the floor, pausing only to catch his breath before diving in again. He fought through the main wave of enemies and came out with minimal bruising and marks.

'Prepare for boss.'

He had to dodge back as the animatronic version of Ryuuko appeared from the floor, brandishing her mock Scissor Sword at him.

He dodged quickly to the right before sending his foot into her side, sending the flimsy animatronic into a building, enraging the enemy more. Robot Ryuuko blasted out of the house and stabbed at him as he dodged, the two combatants moving into blurs as they traded blows one after another. Ryuuko fought through his defense once, slamming him into the ground, bloodied's hands free of its synthetic skin grabbing for his throat, choking him as it weighed his heavy metal body down on him, hoping to end him, but Gamagoori had his entire brute strength, fighting through the lack of oxygen and grabbing the robot, throwing it through another building and buying time to breath before going back into the fight. Eventually Gamagoori got a hold of the robot, and bend one arm so far back, it snapped off, weapon flying with it as he threw it out of reach. The robot glitched as the empty socket sparked, but the missing limb did not stop it. It barreled into Gamagoori, slamming its body into his chest and sending him to the ground, its hand going to strangle him once again. Without both hands, the robot's stragedy failed, and Gamagoori easily slammed the animatronic off of him.

With a quick hand, he pinned the screeching robot and severed its head, effectively ending the simulation. He stayed hovering above the dead animatronic, panting and catching little air into his lungs as others were dispatched to fix the arena and outfit it for the next simulation. Nui slowly made her way toward her pet, a smile curling her lips up.

"You did amazing! I'm surprised you got through it so quickly." Nui complemented, coming to his side as he slowly stood up, brushing off dust. She ran her hands over various cuts on his arms, and picking away what was left of his now shredded shirt, the useless material falling off of him as he stood once more, revealing more wounds.

The uneasy feeling returned.

"You're hurt..." Nui murmured, "More than I thought you would be."

He looked confused for a moment. "I'm fine. It's just a few cuts and bruises."

"Your neck."

Gamagoori's left hand went up to his neck, bruises mirroring the last enemy's hands and fingers rising brightly. He realized it was harder to breathe, explaining his prolonged recovery time.

"It... is hard to breath." He told her, looking down at her for a moment.

"Then let's go, we'll deal with them so you're not in pain." Nui commanded, grabbing his arm and leading him toward the exit, not bothering with worrying about Ragyo's opinion at that moment. When they were back into the main building and on the path to the infirmary, she let him go, but the uneasiness led her to stick by his side instead of leading ahead of him.

"May I ask something?" Gamagoori finally spoke after a long moment of silence. Nui gave him the okay to speak freely.

"Why are you suddenly so... worried about my well-being?"

Nui stopped short, Gamagoori going ahead until he took notice. Her mind jumbled into a series of disbelief, anger, rage, and worry. It was happening again, the sudden change of heart for him. She wasn't supposed to feel worry, remorse, fear, nothing that he had evoked within her. He was doing this, he made her this... this ugly thing with ugly emotions for a person with no worth but for cannon fodder.

Refocus.

"Lady Nui?"

"I simply do not want my pet damaged for when we release you against our foes," Nui quickly made up, smiling to reassure him,

"And those bruises don't look so great, so we should get them done away with."

Gamagoori nodded in understanding, a soft smiling curling his lips to the right. "I understand. I could have easily gone by myself, though, so you could continue working on Lady Ragyo's Kamui."

Nui gave a pout, catching up to him as they continued their way to the infirmary. "You don't have your collar. And with those bruises, you wouldn't be able to, so you would have needed me anyway to go."

He gave a faint chuckle. "You are right after all."

Nui smiled. He didn't have a clue, but it was a close call. For her emotions to fire up like that without notice, it was starting to get serious. She had to put an end to them before this escalated farther, but at the same time it didn't feel wrong. Her worry for the person who served her and protected her, was it something that came naturally?

She shook her head. It couldn't have been. This was not her, these emotions were not her own. He was the reason behind it, he was the source of them. He evoked these disgusting emotions within her.

Her uneasiness grew as she thought, and she made herself stop her anger before it took her prisoner. She looked up at Gamagoori once more, and her uneasiness faded a little.

How could something so soothing hurt her so much?

Night fell before long, and Nui found herself alone for the first night in weeks. They had found minor internal injuries, and Gamagoori had to heal and rest in the infirmary for the rest of the day. Without complaint, he stayed there, but comforted Nui, who stayed by his side, until she had to work once more until sundown.

She slowly pulled the elastic bands out of her hair, the large drill curls coming undone at a touch, her long hair flowing down around her like a sea of soft blonde waves. Usually, she had Gamagoori help her with her hair, but she was alone for the night. She ran her hands through it to comb out any annoying tangles and looked down into the courtyard once more. Nothing had changed since yesterday, the same view as always. Life Fibers glowed in the midst of blackness, leaving the impression of a spider's web across the entire courtyard.

Rain changed the scene a bit, but the rumble of thunder and the clash of lightning did not calm her uneasy nerves. It did not feel right that she was alone, and her pet was lying in a different bed, bound up with injuries. She knew there was no point in feeling like this, but her emotions overpowered her once more. She wanted to hate them, to hate him, but she wanted to feel like this. The emotion, the changes, it felt right.

She looked down at her hands. Once coated in his blood, they were strikingly clean. She could remember the breaking of his mind, the turnover to her side. Uneasiness and guilt washed over her like her hair in the breeze that blew around her. Her hands clenched, and she fought back her ugly, unknown emotions and thoughts. She did not care for him at all. She needed him only to make Satsuki and Nudist Beach suffer; to pull them out of their hiding place to rescue him.

She had no feelings for him. Yet...

She caved, for this one time. She let them wash over her, and she saw her world from a new perspective. She turned on her heels and quietly opened her door, looking down the halls to see if anyone was up at this hour. She adjusted her nightgown, and sprinted out of her room, running silently through the hall toward the infirmary. Her hair weighed her down, but she let it fly behind her in a sail of blonde. She took a left, and quickly hid against the wall in the shadows, narrowly avoiding a sentry making rounds per usual protocols. Ragyo set strict curfews, even for her. If she was caught by him or

any other sentries, she would be escorted back to her room and locked inside until morning came. She moved when the sentry turned the corner, making haste as quietly as she could.

The infirmary door opened with a soft hiss at her touch. She softly panted, winded from her run through the halls and playing cat and mouse with mind-stitched sentries patrolling the halls. She crouched down and walked inside, peeking into rooms as she went to find him. So far, the beds were empty or filled by wounded minions, none the one she was looking for.

She continued on to the end, opening crimson curtains and finding him at last. He was fast asleep on his back, the enlarged bed a comfort only she and Ragyo could grant. She stood and closed the curtains behind her, taking quick steps to him, only stopping when she realized that she could sleep here. The bed was big enough for two if he turned on his side. She turned on her heel and made her way to the storage shelves, looking for a spare blanket.

"Nui?"

She stilled, not expecting for him to wake up. She looked coyly over her shoulder at him, blanket clutched to her chest, seeing his eyes blink slowly.

"Why are you here?" he asked softly, turning to his side to see her better in the dim room.

She gripped the blanket she had grabbed, stumbling for a moment when it caught in her feet, and walked calmly back to him. "I can't sleep."

"You're lying."

She flinched, her face scrunching up at the rude accusation. It was a partial truth, but it wasn't her real reasoning for being there. She sighed softly and made her way on to the bed without a word, Gamagoori immediately making room for her to curl up beside him,

blanket thrown haphazardly over her. She adjusted her spot so she could lean her head against his chest, hearing his heartbeat under her ear and hands.

"... I didn't want to be without you."

She didn't hear him respond, but the pause before he acted frightened her. He moved one arm so it draped over her, his hand pulling his blanket over her to completely cover her. She looked up for a moment, seeing him smile before he settled his head back on to his pillow, and let his eyelids fall.

With her mind at peace, her uneasiness fading into nothing, she curled up tighter against him, and finally found sleep waiting for her in the dark.

A Walk Through A Graveyard

"Nui..."

She didn't want to move. She was comfortable, within her pet's arms, her uneasy emotions washed away. She was in a place of peace, something new to her, but she loved its feeling.

"Nui."

She opened her eyes, and found herself sitting alongside Lady Ragyo, spinning a spindle of basting thread in her hands. She wasn't in Gamagoori's arms, still asleep in the infirmary. She was meeting with the Queen, discussing their next moves against Nudist Beach.

"Yes?"

"It's about time we deployed your pet into the battleground. He has trained long enough, and shows great promise. Outfit him in a COVER suit, and send him to Nudist Beach's main base before they try to retaliate."

"Why put him in a COVER suit? He's strong enough in what he's in. It may be a Goku Uniform, but with some alterations and style changes, we could make it even more powerful!" Nui argued, not enjoying the mental image of Gamagoori in one of the COVER suits.

Ragyo set down the multicolored spindle she played with down on her desk, facing Nui with a smile. "Finish it quickly, and continue progress on Shinra-Kouketsu."

"Yes, ma'am." Nui answered, humming to herself as Ragyo took her wordless leave, heading toward an overseas meeting, which Nui remembered was the reasoning behind planning to attack. Ragyo's rainbow hair illuminated her paths as she walked calmly toward the elevator down, and stopped in the threshold, keeping the door open for a moment as Hououmaru boarded with her.

"And Nui?"

"Yes?"

"Do not get attached to him. Remember, he will die by your hands by the end."

Nui sat up, brushing her dress of any dust. Lady Ragyo's light illuminated her exit as she boarded her elevator with Hououmaru. As soon as the doors closed, Nui's uneasiness resurfaced. She twisted her dress in her hands nervously until the elevator started to descend, and her eyes closed slowly, her voice weak.

"I understand... Lady Ragyo."

'Do not get attached to him.'

Nui knew to follow such orders. Ragyo's word was all, the word she would follow into the Life Fibers as they swallowed the Earth. She could not get attached to him, because she knew she had to kill him, in front of everyone. That was the plan they created for him. Once he used up his usefulness, he would be executed.

But at one hand, she did not want to let go. She didn't like that feeling. She didn't understand why she wanted to completely disobey Lady Ragyo to protect what was hers.

She had a week to decide. She had seven days, whilst Lady Ragyo and Hououmaru were in Eastern Poland for a European meeting of her company to sort out a last-minute issue in Ukraine, to figure out her heart and thoughts, and make up her mind if she wanted to see out Gamagoori's death, or protect him from the wrath destined for him. Her head throbbed, and she slowly sat back down, slowly descending down the wall she stopped against. Here she sat, in the middle of an empty hallway of Honnouji Academy, holding the fate of her pet in her shaking hands.

She curled up into herself, setting her head against her knees.

For once, she didn't know what to do. Her emotional barriers were all but gone, and the lines she made blurred into grey. She didn't want to hurt him, but did not want to disobey her creator.

"This is not me. I do what I am told by Lady Ragyo, in any way possible, as long as it benefits Lady Ragyo." she told herself, fighting the odd side of her developing, "He does not matter to me. He is a pawn; a prisoner who does what he's told. No more... no more..."

She hated this so much.

She needed air. She needed to think. She had to calm down, without her pet. She needed to return to her true self.

She wandered through the school until she stumbled on to a back entrance, the door padlocked and chained. Obviously, Satsuki or whoever knew what was behind this door did not want whatever was on the other side to be seen. She drew out her half of the Scissor Sword and sliced through the rusted chains like butter, and pushed open the rusted shut door, and took in the smells of sweet flowers.

It was a graveyard. Tombstones made of pure stone or black rock covered the semi-circle plot of land, each headstone marked with a name, a quote from the person, and birth and death dates. Flowers long decomposed rested on several of the stones, but out of those grew bright red and white azaleas, climbing up the rotted tombstones. Red poppies spotted the empty lengths of grass alongside yellow tulips and magenta zinnia, leading to a large, healthy weeping willow. Everything was healthy, bright, and green. It did not look abandoned in the slightest. It looked in full bloom, a brilliant fragrance gracing the air around her.

She liked it here. It smelled so perfect, and it was a peaceful place off the beaten path. A safe place. She plucked a flower out of the ground by her feet, near a tombstone labeled 'Suzuki'. She could tell

the flower was a gardenia, and she gently plucked away remaining dirt, and wove the beautiful white flower through her hair so it hung near her ear.

She could see the gardenia flowers scattered through the graveyard, seeing several more flower types before slowly walking through a row of tombstones, reading each name aloud, and checking the date of death. So many were young when they perished, most likely at the cruel hands of Satsuki's Elite, which she knew included Gamagoori.

Many had the name of their killer underneath it, but with a message alongside the name.

'Never did we mean to kill off those who could stay to see the world saved from the ultimate evil.'

"Ultimate evil, huh?" Nui murmured, "Is that what they called us?"

She plucked an azalea, and set it on the tombstone she knelt at, looking around for a moment. A place of death, rendered to one of honest memorial and peace. She found the place she could go to banish away her horrid thoughts, and focus on the important things.

Her uneasiness, however, simmered in her stomach, still there in the back of her mind. It still would not go away completely.

"The creations must rebel against their protectors."

She looked over to the cleared patch of tall grass underneath the hanging tree, and then back at the shut door. No one would find her here, and she could relax the rest of the day away in a mirage of peace. Brushing back the leaves of the tree, she knelt in the spot she chose and slowly laid on her back in the grass. Although the grass tickled her skin and made her itch a bit, she liked the feel of it. With the continued, relaxing scent of flowers in the air and the cool breeze blowing gently through the tree, she found some escape from the pressures of everything, and curled up to rest in her new-found haven.

She woke up to the painful pang of her Life Fibers biting at her head, shocking her up on to her behind.

Gamagoori had broken free of his prison again.

She bolted from under her perfume heaven, slamming the door open and rushing up the stairs leading there, making her feet run faster than a normal human could stand. She had to reach him before things escalated, and the queasiness of her vibrant emotions took hold of her again. Her internal compass, built-in to the Life Fibers inside of him, pointed her around the entire campus until it finally corrected itself, leading her to the underground training room they built.

She found him collapsed in the middle of a destroyed simulation, panting so loud it echoed in the empty metal-rock room like gunshots. Whimpers broke through his pitiful attempts to breathe, most likely fighting back memories of their interactions. She tried to silently reach him, but glass cracked under her feet as she got close, and he turned to her, fright twisting his face.

"You..."

She frowned. "Gamag-"

"STAY AWAY FROM ME!"

He bolted on unstable legs, trying to run from her. Although her first reaction would be to chase him and make him stay still, she calmly followed him until he stumbled against a building, trying to stay on his feet as his body tremored in a cacophony of emotions.

"Gamagoori... please."

He turned toward her, anger and exhaustion crossing her expression. "Stay away! You monster! You..."

She felt more guilty. His terror, his fear, everything he was showing her, it made her feel horrible for her actions. He looked truly scared of her. She watched as he rubbed away tears, falling to his knees against the wall. He whimpered and kept one arm up in defense, not wanting to drop his guard or look at her. Terror swallowed him whole, and all Nui wanted to do was comfort him.

"You... why would you... you monster!"

"Gamagoori..."

She knelt in front of him, watching him whimper and curl up tighter, trying to stay as far away from her as possible. She reached out, hesitated for a moment, and gently touched his head, getting him to look at her, tears spilling over and falling down his cheeks.

"I won't do anything to you."

He hissed. "You liar. You've hurt me... you've done disgusting things to me! You... I... I can't..."

She trailed her hand down to his cheek, softly pushing his tears away. He whimpered against her actions, but surprisingly did not push her away. She brushed away his tears until they stopped. He opened his eyes then, and more continued to fall. She moved to brush them away, but Gamagoori brushed her hands aside, holding her wrists in his hands until he went to look at her, only to drop his head.

"I don't want to hurt you," Gamagoori confessed, confusion clouding his eyes, "Why do I not want to? Why am I not running... why not..."

Nui brushed away the last of his tears, and pressed her forehead against his, hearing his near inaudible sigh of relief. She closed her eyes, and sniffled back the pinpricks in her eyes. He did not bring his arms around her, but he slowly allowed the Life Fibers within him return to control, his mind tired from the constant emotional battle.

She settled between his legs, and draped her arms around his shoulders.

"I don't know why I don't want to hurt you either."

It took a while to clean up Gamagoori, cuts and marks lining his hands and wrists from nearly obliterating the training simulation. They took their time reaching the infirmary, Gamagoori taking a seat on the assigned bed for him and letting her dress his wounds. Gamagoori, now back under her control, was silent and submissive as she carefully dressed his wounds, wrapping them in soft wrappings before putting her hands in his, not looking up.

"Gamagoori... are you alright?"

He squeezed her hands gently. "I am fine, but what about you?"

"Huh?"

He gave her a forlorn look. "You aren't as cold or cruel to me as you were earlier. You've been worried about my health, and you have been getting... nicer. You haven't called me your pet in some time. You have listened to my thoughts, and cared about me. Are you sure you are okay?"

Nui looked down at their hands, unable to form a response right away. She was as confused as he was.

Was she alright? Was this normal?

"Is this how humans like you feel?" she asked instead, looking at him in the eyes. His head tilted slightly in confusion. She looked back down.

"Is feeling sadness, remorse... even guilt, normal for humans like you? Is feeling uneasy normal for you?" she asked better, her hands curling in his, "Is having new feelings for people normal?"

Gamagoori's expression went from forlorn to calm. His hands tightened around hers, one thumb rubbing soothing circles into the side of her right hand.

"Yes. Humans, like me, can feel emotions like that anytime. We feel sadness when loved ones are hurt, or when we see pain and suffering. Many of us feel guilt for past actions and words, things that we absolutely regret. It's normal for us."

"But you are not entirely human, are you?"

Nui refrained from answering, looking away to the side. She knew what she was.

He gave a soft smile. "You're something in-between; part human, part Life Fiber. But tell me this, please, Lady Nui... what is stopping your human part from being human?"

Nui could feel her heart, her half-human heart, pound in her chest. What was stopping her from acting human? What kept her from feeling like a human, from acting and feeling like one?

"It's out of my control. I was not made as a human," she told him quietly, not looking toward him, "I am meant to act as a vessel to help Lady Ragyo and the Life Fibers. Nothing more."

"It's the Life Fibers, Lady Nui. They should not take away from your humanity." Gamagoori told her, "You are no more a vessel for them as I am for Lady Satsuki's forces. We are humans."

Nui let his hand guide her eyes back to him. His smile made her uneasiness disappear once more.

"So what is stopping you from being human?"

Nui knew the answer now, but she did not want to admit it. For so long, she knew that to live, she had to follow. She could do it in any way, but she had to follow. She had to live by the rules set at her

birth, and live as she was told. She was not human, but mutant; the supernaturally powerful Life-Fiber infused human. The Life Fibers would consume everything, and humanity would be no more. She was not human, yet as the fog cleared for the first time in her short life, she was beginning to believe that she was human.

"Nothing right now. Come with me, Gamagoori."

With her photogenic memory, she led Gamagoori back to the door she found earlier, and opened it with ease. The sun was slowly sinking down past the horizon, casting the flower-scented graveyard into a gleaming sunset. Few flowers that bloomed in sunlight had closed in the descending sun, but the rest were as bright and blooming as they were when she visited. She led him a little farther into it and let his arm go, turning to him as he looked around the graveyard, eyeing the tombstones with recollection.

"I remember this place, before I came to you," he explained, recalling memories of the past with Satsuki, "We built this sanctuary to honor students who fell to our hands or other's hands. We never meant to kill, but to make them understand the danger they would face."

"So you remembered who they were, and made sure they would be remembered in death?"

He nodded, confirming Nui's thoughts. "We allowed their families to visit, to pay their tribute. They held much scorn for us and our ruthlessness, but they were grateful for this one peace. They were glad that their children were treated to a proper burial, where many before this were either buried in unmarked graves around the city, or thrown into the bay."

Nui looked down at the grave she put a flower on to earlier. There was kindness in their hearts, even though Lady Satsuki held dictatorship over them all. She found the line below their attackers again, and her heart rang in the uneasy wave that covered it.

"Am I evil?"

He turned to her as she stood back on her feet. She looked at him with glistening eyes, real tears threatening to spill.

"Am I evil, am I so terrible?"

He immediately walked over to her, grabbing one of her hands, his free hand brushing away the coming tears. She looked at him as he smiled sincerely, interlacing their hands together at his side.

"I am starting to believe you are not... Nui."

Reboot, Fifty Percent Complete

She woke to the sound of wind rustling through the trees, the soft, soothing scent of honeysuckles gracing her nose. Soft grass tickled her skin, crickets chirping around her complementing the cool environment.

It was a peaceful night, the stars visible from her pitch dark place under the weeping widow. The gravestones around her appeared darker than the night, the lettering standing stark against their dark homes. Flowers that held bio-luminescence brightened the area in soft blue light, lining the rows of the dead.

She didn't remember falling asleep there. She remembered her visit out there with Gamagoori, the last of her memory ending in him holding her hand, truly giving her sincerity and comfort, telling her he was beginning to believe that she was not evil. When she tried to think past it, her memories came up blank, her head throbbing as her mind searched for the pieces that should fill these gaps. She started to become uneasy, worry filling her.

She never had issues in memory.

"This is punishment, my dear girl, for your unholy mistake."

"NO!"

Her vision faded, the peaceful night fading before her eyes until all she could see was blurry, watery metal walls and prison bars. Her peace disappeared, her body felt crippled, and she could barely keep her eyes open. She could feel bones within her broken and splintered, some completely shattered into pieces. The pain that shot up and down her limbs and spine put black spots in her already fading, murky vision. She could not hear out of one ear, and she did not feel the calming touch of her eyepatch covering her scarred-covered left eye.

Nothing was healing.

She tried to breathe, but all that she could do was gurgle liquid, and barely find air. Her lungs had filled with her blood, her stabbing coughs coming out wet, blood spraying from her lips as she hacked out both air and blood. Any attempts to move either did not happen or were so painful she had to stay still. She couldn't understand why she was like this. She tried to blink away some of the blurriness, but could not keep it clear. Through the din of her failing eyesight, she could see the blurry outline of someone through the bars of what she could assume was a cage. He was tall, and the blond hair she could see...

'Gamagoori.'

He was in arm's length, but she couldn't move. A pale hand ran around his throat, turning his head toward her as he turned to look away. Rainbow lights blinded her eye, her working ear barely picking up Gamagoori's anguished cry for her.

For the first time in her life, Nui cried. True tears fell as she sank into unconsciousness, the pain following her all the way down into the dark abyss.

'I'm sorry... I'm so sorry I became human.'

Five Hours Earlier...

They had sat there for a while, simply looking up through the branches of the tree to see the stars coming out. Lying in the grass, side-by-side, heads as close as they could be comfortably, they looked up at the sky and pointed out stars they could see through the tree, enjoying themselves in the darkness around them.

"I never thought about being human." Nui admitted as they took a break from star-gazing, sitting up and undoing her hair, letting it fall

from its twin drill-tails. It fell out on to the grass, but she could easily deal with what could stick in to it.

"Never?"

She shook her head. "I was always busy with the Life Fibers, fighting for Lady Ragyo. The thought of being human never came to mind. I was always told that I was all Life Fibers, never once a human, that I would serve them and her until they finally took over."

Gamagoori shook his head. "I'm sorry that you never were taught to understand emotions like uneasiness, guilt, remorse... sorrow, protective..."

Nui sighed softly, brushing her hands through her hair. These new emotions still troubled her, however. Even though between them, being human and accepting them would be fine, but within her creator's presence, she would immediately face consequences for straying from her original path to Life Fiber domination. There was no room for personal exploration or attachment. Only the success of the Kiryuuin Conglomerate and the Life Fibers mattered, and she had pledged her life to the cause, no matter what it took she would follow her creator and her Life Fibers to the end, until it consumed all.

"I can't go against her... when she returns, all of this has to disappear. We go back to pet and Master. No exceptions."

Gamagoori almost looked disappointed, staring down at his hands. "So all of this, we have to forget it happened?"

"Lady Ragyo would kill you if she found out I changed. She would do it in the most painful way possible. I can't let that happen, I won't let her hurt you!"

Nui jumped into him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. His arms wove around her as she tightened her hold on him, her arms slowly moving so they wrapped around his neck.

"I don't ever want to see you hurt... never again."

Gamagoori knew that he had changed her. Never would she worry about his well-being, but here she was, hoping that he would not get harmed. He tightened his hold on her, and smiled into her shoulder before finding his voice again, the inner most voice inside his head, the true Gamagoori, making him speak it.

"I don't want harm to come to you either."

She chuckled, slowly leaning out of their embrace to look him in the eye, running a hand over his right cheek. "I'm glad. I'm really glad."

He smiled at her, getting her to smile back. Nui liked this peace, but she knew it would not last. Wind whipped hard around them, sending their eyes to the sky as a helicopter flew dangerous low over them, heading toward the landing pad on the roof.

"They can't be back already..." Nui breathed, standing up from Gamagoori and watching the helicopter land, hoping with her entire being that it would not be Hououmaru and Lady Ragyo returning from a shorter than expected business trip, but no bright light came from the machine. Instead, gunfire echoed over the roof, and her heart rang out.

'Nudist Beach.'

"Gamagoori... they found us. Nudist Beach is invading." Nui announced, turning to him and offering a hand. A dark expression crossed his face as the Life Fibers around his mind pulled tighter. She knew the real Gamagoori would hate her, but she had to defend her home for now. She had a face to upkeep if she wanted Gamagoori's life spared from a deadly fate. He took her hand, and they calmly walked back into the Academy, readying their minds for the fight.

It wasn't Nudist Beach.

She hadn't realized that it would happen so quickly. The moment they moved toward the stairwell to the roof, they found themselves in an ambush situation. COVERS and minions alike grabbed and threw them, attempting to knock them out for an easier fight. They were nothing to Nui, and Gamagoori broke free about as easily, but the constant waves of them forced them into running, which led to them splitting up as their ambushers came from the hall they ran down. With a heavy heart and instructions to not concede to their control, they split up, running opposite ways and sealing their fate.

She easily knocked the cheap, weak fighters and ran, keeping an easy but swift pace, but she knew her time had run out when she spotted Lady Ragyo's multi-color light shining at the end of the hall. Darkness met her suddenly as she tried to run the other way, and she submitted to her creator's ambush.

She woke to the sound of metal grinding on metal, and the soft, inaudible words of her creator. Nui went to move toward the sound, but her arms would not move, bound behind her back at the wrists by a large cuff that bound her lower arms, connected to a chain on the wall. She was stripped of her boots and bows, her dress grimy at the hem and ripped around all sides. Her legs could move, but she was effectively trapped with limited mobility.

Trapped like she had trapped Gamagoori a long time ago, before beating him.

"Ah, you're awake, Nui."

She kept a straight face as Ragyo appeared before her, the older's colder hands grabbing her chin and roughly pulling it up to look at her. Lady Ragyo did not look happy, and Nui suppressed her shiver of fear. However, she knew Lady Ragyo would know, and her chuckled confirmed it.

"Afraid are we? Since when have you felt such... *human* emotions?"

Nui somehow held her tongue, afraid that if she spoke she would risk his life, but if she was captured, he must have been as well. It did look like Lady Ragyo's fingers were coated in dried blood. She looked down, but Lady Ragyo's nails bit into her face, keeping her head skyward. Blood trickled from few of the punctures. The taste of blood was nothing new, but it made Nui worried of what was to come.

"He did this, didn't he? Filled your head with false words and human hopes, and you, my beautiful seamstress, fell for his tricks. I knew I should have slaughtered him before I left."

"He did nothing!" Nui barked, "He does not matter in this!"

Lady Ragyo's smile grew malicious. "My sweet, sweet, child... you have proven to me that you have grown attached to this dog. I believe now he is mine, and I shall dispose of him before he becomes more of a hindrance to us."

Nui's heart fell, but her feet moved, trying to struggle to move against her bindings as Lady Ragyo moved away from her. She cried out as she tried to move her arms, only to hurt herself as her legs collapsed underneath her. She went to try again, trying anything to keep her creator's malicious intents from happening, trying to keep Gamagoori safe. She yelled out as bones in her upper arms and shoulders popped and groaned under her continued efforts to break the metal binding her, but she still could not escape.

Ragyo watched her fighting with a humorous look.

"What have I told you, Nui? You are not like him, and never will be."

Nui struggled again to get back on her free, even if she hurt. She had to fight. "Y-you're wrong."

"Oh?"

"I... I can be human, I am human! You've always told me otherwise but you're wrong."

Ragyo chuckled softly, putting a hand on Nui's shoulder and putting her back on her knees. Nui submitted to it, Ragyo turned and began to walk toward the exit. "Well, let's see how inhuman I can make your pathetic, worthless pet."

"STAY AWAY FROM GAMAGOORI!" Nui screeched, her voice breaking as she made another big attempt, only resulting in her feet scraping against the concrete floor, sending her on to her knees again. Ragyo looked back at her once again, and sauntered toward her.

Nui looked up as Ragyo's white heels slammed into the side of her face, the painful kick sending her entire body toward the wall to her right, her head cracking hard against the concrete. Her mind spun, losing consciousness for a few seconds, her thoughts scrambling and scattering. She could see nothing but stars in her dark world until she came to again less than a minute later, seeing the same heel that kicked her standing in front of her, spotted in blood. She couldn't comprehend the consequences, her mind still trying to recover from the impact near shattering her skull.

"Look at what you've done, Nui. You splattered blood on my shoes. It will never come out. I might as well paint the rest in red."

Gamagoori did not know how long he sat in the dark room he was thrown in to, but he did know what he was forced to listen to was slowly ripping his heart out.

Through a speaker presumably above him, the unfiltered screams and cries of Nui came loud and piercing.

He had been stripped of all freedoms, chained down at the wrists and forearms, blindfolded, and now had to listen to Nui's torture at

the hands of Ragyo. He shivered in the freezing air, the screams hitting his eardrums multiplying the cold shock up his back.

He could hear her yelps and cries alongside the impacts that brought them. Ever so often, he would hear liquid either splat or squish in to the barrage of audio, making his stomach roll over on multiple occasions. Ragyo's voice never stopped.

"He is nothing! He is a prisoner, a human pet to be broken, used, and thrown away like the rest of the trash! You will do the same!"

"N-no! No I won't"

Nui. He struggled to hear her, but she repeated her denial stronger, the sound of scraping chains coming through.

"He has done more kind things for me then you have ever!"

"I CREATED YOU, YOU DEFIANT LIFE FIBER BEING!"

"I. AM. **HUMAN**!"

He forced himself to drown out the violent screaming and torture, but it could not be blocked. He had to struggle against the rising need to vomit as Ragyo's merciless beating of Nui continued, growing more and more violent at each scream fight. The threads around his mind loosened, Gamagoori freed for the moment, but his reaction to the audio slamming into his memory was not different.

Guilt swallowed him whole as tears fell, soaking into his blindfold.

'I should have never tried. If I had known... I would have never pushed past her boundaries.

"I'm sorry for putting you in this situation, Nui. I'm sorry."

He curled up into himself, wiggling his hands to test the hard metal around his hands, and did his best to drown out the horrific sound. He did not know that what he heard bled through the single wall that

separated him and Nui, their chains held down by the same large stake in the ground.

Present...

He didn't want to look at her anymore. What he saw before him was barely the Nui he knew. She was broken beyond repair, bones poking out of her skin and numerous brusies, cuts, and slashmarks. He couldn't see what had happened inside her, but he could easily guess bones within her were broken as well. She lay in her growing pool of blood, hair soaked through in red and turning it a shade of dirty pink. She could barely breath, gargling liquid in her lungs. He could stomach it all, just barely, but when she started to cry, he needed to get away.

"Do you see what your pathetic attempts to befriend her have done, Ira Gamagoori?" Ragyo whispered in his ear, her hand still holding his head to the broken, damaged Nui in the cage. He fought against her hand again, trying to look away, to make the horrifying image go away, but Ragyo was insistent in making him see her.

"Do you understand?"

Gamagoori whimpered, wanting to be free, away from the absolute freezing touch of Ragyo. He wanted to help Nui.

"Why... why would you do that... to her?"

Ragyo chuckled. "She defied me. She needed to be... reminded of what she was."

He struggled against his binds, his arms immovable. He looked her in the eye, seeing the scars that were hidden by her eyepatch. She blinked, tears falling harder, trying to move her head so she shielded her face from him, but she could not move. He wanted to reach out. He wanted to comfort her. Anything to stop her from crying.

"You're also not under her control right now."

He stiffened, unable to comprehend the trouble he was about to face. He actually had not realized that he had broken out of Nui's mind control; it had become normal to interact with Nui in a human way; unlike the days before she started to develop contradicting emotions for him, he never wanted to remember them again.

Ragyo came behind him, kneeling and running one hand down his shoulder to his neck, his new collar tight around his healed neck.

"Why do you stay if you are yourself once again? Why do you stay for Nui, your enemy. My daughter's nemesis. Why do you sit and let yourself rot here with such a pathetic weapon of mine?"

Gamagoori bowed his head. Why did he stay?

"B-because..."

Ragyo's claw-like hand trailed over his shoulder, down his arm, enticing his body to shiver and shake, begging to rip away from the woman's obviously perverted touch.

"Because... she can be better than the weapon you forced her to become."

Ragyo huffed, standing up and placing her hands on his head. "Well then... it's time to see how you will fry!"

"DON'T TOUCH HIM!"

Ragyo and Gamagoori looked to Nui, who had turned toward them more. Her scream had been almost completely gargled in blood, the red liquid flowing from the corners of her mouth. She spat out a large amount, letting some drain from her mouth before she tried to sit up enough to speak.

"D-don't... hurt him. Hurt me. Please..."

"Nui, please. Don't..."

Ragyo's interest were caught as she sauntered up to the cage bars, kneeling down. "Oh? Are you bargaining with me, *my pet*?"

Nui coughed up more blood, spitting twice before she fell to the ground, but fought against her broken body to sit up on her elbows, arms stretched out to the bar, one hand reaching out to Gamagoori, who fought back tears. She smiled at him, and returned her attention to Ragyo.

"H-hurt me," Nui gargled, spitting more blood and clearing her throat, "Hurt me... all you want, break me until I'm nothing, just please..."

"Please do not hurt him."

Reboot Complete

She remembered her earliest memories.

She wasn't treated like her older sibling, Satsuki, who got to do almost everything she pleased, and got very special attention from Ragyo when she could spare the time. The treatment she received had been cruel and unjust, in her new opinion.

Experiments, pain and evasive examinations, even sample collection. She got treated more like a specimen then a child, always seeing needles and lasers wherever she looked. She did not understand why Ragyo would do such painful things to her, but she fought when she could. Ragyo would put down every emotion she had; fear, anger, joy, sadness, regret. All of them. If she was caught showing, feeling, or speaking about any kind of emotion, she was hit and put back into place. She would always tell her that weak human things like emotions did not suit her.

A lot of things, Ragyo went on to tell her in her childhood, that normal people did, did not suit her.

She learned early on, before she reached the age of four, that Ragyo could get away with anything. She could beat her until she sported cuts and scars, put marks from countless needles and syringes entering her skin along her forearms, and she would still come clean without consequences. At school, she would tell the lie Ragyo told her to tell about the wounds she came with. She never wore short-sleeved shirts to make sure her arms covered in marks were hidden to avoid scathing eyes and probing questions.

Ragyo caught her once trying to hide a black eye with makeup, and immediately wiped it away and slapped her for touching her things and for disobeying her. She was angry at her human attempt to conceal her black eye. She continued to reiterate her reasoning on the subject: She was not human. She would never be a human. She

was the Life Fiber's child, their vessel for her to rule the world. Human things did not suit her.

She was pulled from school soon after the incident, and lost touch with Satsuki more often. The ebony-hair sibling was excited and amazed when she saw her until she turned six, and the Satsuki she remembered disappeared, and a colder, collected girl appeared. She was shoved to the side, put into her own separate room connected to the labs. She was cut off from any joy, any laughter, and all freedom.

She turned six, and everything changed for her. Ragyo took her to the examination table as she always would, connected her to the large machines through scans, and told her to empty her thoughts.

For a long time, she had not realized that she was made of Life Fibers. She had figured she was all human, like everyone else, with skin and hair and a smile.

She never smiled sincerely ever again after her sixth birthday, the day the Life Fibers within her fully activated, beginning her evolution into what she was before her capture of Gamagoori. She grew into an overly bubbly and childish girl, taking happiness from the hell she was told to raise. Her cheerfulness hid the darkness within her, what she could truly do with her inhuman body. The cutesy aura she had caged the demonic nature programmed in to her.

Her smile was fake happiness, joy covering her malicious intents wherever she roamed. No one suspected her as a bad person.

Through her transformation, the beatings ceased, and she accepted the plan Ragyo gave to her. Become a servant for the Life Fibers, and fight for them and her. She accepted, of course, and left her scared innocent past self, never looking back until today.

She was becoming that scared little girl again. The girl who did not know her true origins, fighting the abusive mother who saw her as nothing but a tool and mutant. The little girl, innocent and scared of

the pain she was put through, feeling emotion and acting on impulse, fighting Ragyo when she could.

It was the return of a long-buried person, whom she sealed away long ago, and she missed her very much.

*"How dare you... act like something you aren't! You were never human, and you never will be. **NEVER!**"*

She would spit those words at her as she pushed and hit her, making her understand through abuse that she would not feel or show emotions, not even think about emotion. She was not human, never human, an eternity away from humanity.

She believed her, for long she believed Ragyo's words. She had never felt human after her Life Fibers became active. She lost touch with the humanity within her, the human part that she still possessed. She was not entirely Life Fibers. She was part human, part Life Fiber; the DNA of Ragyo Kiryuuin and the Original Life Fiber. She had humanity within her.

"You will understand, you incompetent little girl, that no one will ever want you as you are! Accept the facts now: loneliness will be your best friend."

She never made friends in school. She tried to play with them, but her intellect and physical prowess made them shy away from her. Some feared her, some bullied her, some even went as far as trying to convince her that she wasn't a girl, but a boy on drugs.

She was lonely most days, and the days Satsuki did not spend with her she spent in an abandoned classroom, drawing out what she hoped would be a brighter future, where Ragyo would not beat on her and be nice, and Satsuki would play with her and help her through the trials of life. She even drew her 'daddy' who had, by Satsuki's sixth birthday, left them. She hoped that she would make a

lot of friends, and maybe make clothes and battle bad people who hurt others.

"My dear, dear child. Do not worry about others. They mean nothing to us. Focus on our mission, and then you will be free."

Is this what Ragyo meant as freedom?

Nui finally could open her eyes, tears sliding down from her visit through her memories.

"You're awake. I'm glad I came then."

Nui struggled to lift her head to look at Ragyo, blood decorating the old white clothes she dawned in place of her fabulous dresses. To avoid ruining more of her closet, she had special 'artist' outfits created so she could easily spray Nui's blood on to her without worry.

"Eyes down."

Her foot slammed into the back of Nui's head, sending her face first into the concrete floor. Her chin crumbled at the force, sending her teeth up into each other. Ragyo simply moved her foot and rounded her. She pulled at Nui's ruined dress, shredded by her punishments and stained black and red in blood from countless wounds.

"Such a waste of clothing..." Ragyo sighed, ripping a shredded piece off of the dress, "And you had taken care of it for so long. But like a child's mindset, everything must change eventually."

Nui closed her eyes and tried to relax as Ragyo's hand wandered over her, pulling her trashed dress off of her, ripping it up one side to pull it off. She was glad she had a least her bra and underwear to cover her. She had gotten used to Ragyo's 'intimate touches', but now they scared her. Her eyes open to the corrupt ways of her creator, she would fight if she tried to touch her closely ever again.

"So much skin to bruise and cut~," Ragyo sighed passionately, coming back to Nui's head, "So much time to have you pay for your puny pet's mistakes."

Nu couldn't hold back her smile. "As long... as he's safe... I'm alright with the pain and torture."

"You're pitiful."

Nui smiled even as Ragyo's leg kicked out, her foot colliding with her cheek and sending her to the back wall, her head making hard contact. Her vision went black, but she could still feel Ragyo abuse her body, slamming her around, hitting and punching her, bruising and marring her skin. Several well-placed kicks at her stomach and spine had her curled up, keeping back vomit. Ragyo grabbed hold of her hair, pulling her head to look her in the eyes.

"So stubborn..." Ragyo cooed, "Yet so breakable. Now for the next layer of red paint on our canvas."

Nui continued to smile through it, even as Ragyo undid her restraints and broke every bone in her left arm, blood from cuts lining all her skin draining across the already blood-soaked floor. She wouldn't stop there, she would not let go. If taking the punishment and pain and misery meant keeping Gamagoori out of her hands, then she would take it all. She would accept every kick, every stab wound, and every abuse.

She would protect him until she met death. She would not let the likes of Ragyo kill the one light in her life.

The only person to show her how to be human again.

Gamagoori was glad that he could move his arms again, but he still had to listen to the continual beatings. He was moved somewhere else, an actual room with bed and bathroom included, but the door

locked from the outside, the noise from Nui's torture chamber going all hours. He couldn't turn it down or off.

It has been forty-eight hours of nothing but Ragyo screaming at Nui, torturing and abusing her. He hadn't slept in the same amount of time, unable to sleep without powerful night-terrors courtesy of the constant sound.

Luckily, Ragyo had stopped for the moment, and all he could hear was Nui's release of emotion, crying softly as she possibly lie on her side or back, bleeding out as her body slowly healed itself.

"Gamagoori..."

He looked up toward the ceiling, his only clue to the source of the sound, and listened.

"If he's safe... If I have to stay here forever, and be beaten for his safety... I will always accept the beating."

He sprawled out on his bed, listening to Nui's weak, thick voice speak out her thoughts. Tears burned in the corners of his eyes.

"I hope he's safe... that he's not hurt, or worried about me. I... I should be okay."

He sat up, tears falling before he could brush them away. One hand covered his mouth to keep from crying out or gasping. He had to listen. A door opened, he couldn't tell if it came from the audio above or from someone opening his door, but he continued to listen.

"The human to show me what I once was... I will never stop. Even if you break me, and change me back to who I was before he showed me myself, I will not stop defending him!"

Ragyo's chuckle broke through the audio. "If that is what you wish."

He drowned it out, not wanting to hear Ragyo beat her again. He covered his ears, hoping that she would not change Nui again.

Although he tried to drown it out, it only was muffled, and he heard everything clear as the day sky.

"Make it stop..." he said aloud, knowing no one would hear it.

Instead, some was fitted over his hands, and he opened his eyes to find Rei Hououmaru putting a pair of noise-cancelling headphones on him. He sighed in relief as he adjusted them over his ears, the sound of Nui's abuse fading away. He looked at the REVOCS assistant with caution, seeing that she was wearing a pair as well.

'These have a communicator in them, so we can talk without hearing what Lady Ragyo is doing. Mind if I take a seat?'

He didn't want to make a mistake; Rei was working for REVOCS and Ragyo, meaning she was an enemy. She knew about the plan for Life Fibers to consume the world, and knew almost everything about the Life Fibers. However, she had never stopped in to talk to him besides asking if he could cope for a little longer before giving him his meals. He made room on his bed and Rei took a seat on the edge. He kept his distance as the door closed, locking them inside the room.

'Do you know how to use these?'

'I... don't...'

'Well, you used it there. It picks up on a specific set of chemicals and brainwaves in your head, and lets me hear it. Rest assured, it doesn't pick up every thought. We made it to be very specific in what it picks up.'

Gamagoori relaxed, glad that all his thought weren't broadcasted to her. A peace in the chaotic mess he had been thrown in to.

He focused for a moment, trying to figure out something. 'Why are you doing this?'

Rei looked to the side, guilt and conflict crossing her once unreadable expression.

'I... I am here to help.'

'Excuse me?'

Rei sighed, and adjusted her headphones. 'At the rate Lady Ragyo is assaulting Nui, we'll lose not just the chance to complete Shinra-Kouketsu, but Nui.'

'I refuse to let that happen.'

Rei pulled one earphone off her ear, and hummed in thought, pulling hers off. He urged him to do the same, and found silence. He didn't like the silence. When did the torture ever stop?

"Lady Ragyo knocked Nui out. We have ten minutes before it begins again. I am here to help you stop this-"

The door opened, and Lady Ragyo stood in the doorway. Rei took the headphones from him and quickly thanked her for testing them with her. Rei was allowed to leave with a pointed look from Ragyo. She looked toward him, and he suppressed a shiver. She let herself in, taking a seat where Rei had been.

"Lady Ragyo... a pleasant surprise to have a visit."

"Indeed. I would like to know why Rei was in here. I realize she was doing final testing on the headphones."

"She wanted to make sure I was alright. I haven't been sleeping well, ma'am."

Ragyo smiled, leaning toward him. "I can easily help with that."

He dodged her fist and rolled through the door, making haste to get as far from Ragyo as he could, knowing that she was trying to hurt him. As he reached a corner, Life Fibers wrapped around his ankles,

sending him to the ground. More circled above him before flipping him on to his back and pinning him down face up, Ragyo coming up to his side, glowing with a sinister aura trailing her. She knelt beside him and ran a hand delicately over his face. Her fingers, cold and unforgiving, caused him to shiver.

"It's time for your reset."

Ragyo's hand rose above him, Life Fiber threads wrapping around them like spiders. He struggled and screamed as Ragyo forcibly shoved the threads through his skin and into his mind, gasping for life as they made their way into it, tying tightly with relentless force.

His mind went blank and shut down as the final strings of his mind stitch secured, Ragyo's spiteful smile the last thing he saw.

A Rip in the Chain

Blinding pain welcomed Nui into the next day. Her head pounded painfully as she slowly sat up, immediately rubbing her temples to try to calm her pounding headache. She did not remember much from the past two days, she realized as the pain slowly faded away. She looked around her surroundings, and found herself in a blood-soaked concrete corner, her hair saturated in the same red liquid. She was only clothed in her undergarments, soaked in blood as well. She could not remember how she got there, and what caused such a blood soak. When she tried to figure out what had happened, her memories were blank, or maybe she had simply arrived here for safety.

Nevertheless, it was not her problem. She slowly stood up, balancing on the wall as her legs collapsed, weak from obvious lack of use. It took her several tries to stand, and more to start walking. When she could stand and walk correctly, she walked toward the plain table in the concrete room, brushing back her hair, her hands coming back tinted in red. She did not question it, knowing that whatever happened did not matter now, and washed off the blood on her hands. The dusty mirror above her showed her bruised face, and the blood and soaked into her hair framing her head.

No memory came of how this happened, but she did not care anymore. She had work to do on Shinra-Kouketsu.

Her dress and accessories were laid out for her, ready for their wearer. She ran a hand gently over her dress, happy to see it again. Her eyepatch was also there and she gladly picked it up and secured it over her scarred left eye, adjusting her hair to make room for it. She would need a shower to get the blood out of her hair, which was of little inconvenience.

She had much to do, including seeing if her pet was ready for more training.

She was glad to go back to work, stitching together the pieces of the ultimate Kamui, sewing machines clicking around her. She pulled her current string up, catching it in her mouth and trimming it. She hummed silently as she worked, rounding her current piece of the Kamui, eyeing the hem for a moment before moving to the top, stitching together the last part of the piece, making sure nothing was wrong or crooked. The work continued on as normal, humming along with the sound of sewing machines working around the clock, Life Fibers lighting her work in a beautiful soft red glow.

She took a break after she moved the finished part on to the large stand she had created for it. She hadn't yet visited her pet, and she wondered if he was ready to start training again for when he would be deployed against Nudist Beach.

As she approached his door, she found herself stopping, doubting her next move.

Uneasiness, doubt, uncertainty. Not possible, she couldn't feel uneasy. She was just visiting him, checking in on her pretty pet so she could get him to training. There was no point to the emotion filling her. She pushed it away for the moment, glad that her body did as she told it.

She reached the door, pressing her hand against the cold metal door, and it did not respond. The door did not open, locked tight, a red light flashing on the panel beside it. She entered the code she knew would open it for her, but the stupid machine did not accept it, keeping her locked from her pet. She pounded her hands on the door for a moment, hoping that he would hear her and open the door from his side.

"Can you open the door, my pet?" She asked, hoping her voice would carry through the heavy door. She pressed her ear to the door, and heard shuffling on the other side. She hoped he would open the door, but she only heard more shuffling, and a heavy thump near the bottom of the door.

"Open the door, now." she demanded.

From the other side, she heard an answer. "I can't open it."

"You forgot a few words there, my pet~" Nui announced, "I know you can open this door."

She waited for an answer, but heard not a verbal response, but a vocal one. The muffled sound of crying came through to her ears. She did not understand the reaction, and pounded on the door once more. The crying continued, and Nui's uneasiness rose higher, making her question her methods. She stopped the pounding, and went down on her knees, hoping she was closer to him.

"Open the door, now."

"What happened to you?"

Nui started, not able to believe that he would ask such a pointless question. What happened to her? She was the same as usual; working on Lady Ragyo's Ultimate Kamui, keeping her pet in line, awaiting Ryuuko's return. Nothing had changed besides this weird uneasy feeling.

"What do you mean, silly? Nothing's happened to me. What I want to know is why you have stopped being my submissive pet."

"She changed you, didn't she?!"

Now she was just annoyed. "Make more damned sense, or I'm going to break in to that room and break you again. What the hell are you rambling on about?"

"Your stolen humanity."

Humanity...

Nui went silent for a moment, a barrage of broken memories and thoughts assaulting her mind. None of it made sense, none of it. The

emotions contained within these shards did not make sense either. She was a Life Fiber being, not a weak human with emotions. She would never think about emotions, never feel them. She was as far away from humanity as Gamagoori was from Life Fibers.

But what about this uneasiness?

She shuddered. She wasn't human. It was a lie. A lie. A LIE! He was trying to get into her head, fill it with false words.

"You... make up the most hilarious stories!" Nui exclaimed, fighting back an uncontrollable mashup of swarming unknowns, "I was never human."

"You don't remember anything? Nothing from before?," Gamagoori shouted back, emotions choking his voice, "The torture Ragyo put you through! The lengths you went to protect me."

Nui scoffed. "Protect you from Lady Ragyo? She wouldn't hurt you as long as you were obedient, why would she hurt me?"

"Nui, please wake up! It's *Ragyo* that's the enemy, don't you care *anym-*"

Nui chuckled darkly, oh so maliciously. "You say her name with so much poison, and try to fill my head with weakness. I'm going to force this door open, and break you all over again so you understand the rules, *pet* ."

It took her a while to break through the door, eventually getting Hououmaru to open it. She found her pet looking unlike himself, defeated, which did not suit a pet of hers. It was obvious he broke free again, and such rule breaking must be punished. He wasn't even wearing his collar! His behavior and emotions were pitiful and disgraceful. The blatant lies he told were the final straw.

He followed her like the obedient pet she knew, but that uneasy feeling from earlier returned when she looked back at him, and found him staring at her with a look. Hopeful? Disappointment? Anguish? It did not have a fixed point, but it made her very, very uneasy. More random flashes of broken memory hit her, but none of it still pieced together. None of it made sense, and all it did was make her feel more.

She growled under her breath, her hands tightening into fists. He was the reason behind all of this. He would be made to suffer.

The moment they were alone in the small room she had broken him first, she had him on the ground violently, leaning on one leg set near his face. Her gaze was as dark as shadow, angry as an inferno. She watched him squirm, but not drop his guard. She could see the emotions behind his eyes, and disgust filled her at the look he gave her. As if she would give mercy.

There is no mercy for traitors who don't understand their place.

"You are going to suffer."

He closed his eyes, and her smile grew darker. She moved her foot on the wall, and swung it back at his head, sending him grinding against the wall until he hit the floor. He slowly started to sit up when she slammed her foot down in to his ribs, not hard enough to break them but to bruise and bang them up easily. He hollered out in pain, but did not fight back, even when she grabbed him and slammed him against the wall, kneeling over him as she repeatedly slammed her left fist into him, mostly his face. Immediately imprints of her hits appeared on his face, blood splattering against his face.

"How dare you try to turn against Lady Ragyo?!" Nui shouted at him, spitting each word at him with every punch.

She saw red with each punch, watching Gamagoori simply submit to the beating. Her uneasiness came again, but it only made her want to beat it away. She paused for a moment and slammed his head

against the concrete wall, hearing the cry of agony as his human skull threatened to crack against the hard stone. He tightened her grip on him, growling as she rose her fist again.

"YOU. PATHETIC. EXCUSE OF A PET!"

She locked the chain down on to its stake, testing if it would release and finding it satisfactory. He would sit here in the dungeon in his blood until she found him obedient and submissive like before. If it took torture on the levels when she captured him, she would go that far. His complete change was disturbing and would not be tolerated.

Her beating had knocked him out, marks and cuts along with blood covered his face and chest, but she did not care at the moment. Her pet must learn discipline once again. Once done with his ruined shirt, which she threw out of one of the windows in the halls, she walked calmly toward the Sewing Rooms again to continue her work as promised.

That feeling from earlier returned heavy, and she stopped to calm her beating heart. It was about ready to beat through her chest, it hurt. Why was she feeling like this? Emotions were not meant to be felt by Life Fiber beings like her. Emotions were pointless, weak points in a person, making anyone falter and stall in anything important.

This pain... it was... familiar...

'Nothing will stop me from being human now. He's right. I could be human if I chose.'

She gasped as her legs gave way, her body shaking as memories burned into her, words not her own spoken in her ear. She could not accept being human. She would never accept emotions as part of her. No one would make her believe the false accusations of her so-called 'humanity'. She was not human. She was not.

Her grabbed her chest as the pain in her chest grew. These memories, these vision, they were lies planted by her pet. She could never have accepted the words of humans calling her one of their own. She was raised a Life Fiber being, and will always be one. Nothing will change those facts. She would not listen to the manic ramblings of people meant to be Life Fiber snacks.

Why was this happening to her?

"Am I evil, am I so terrible?"

She could see Gamagoori walk up to her quickly, taking one of her hands and brushing away her tears with the other. She felt his fingers move against hers until they interlaced at his side, her sparkling eyes looking up at him as he spoke words she never expected to hear.

"I am starting to believe you are not, Nui."

"LIES. ALL OF THEM LIES!" she roared, standing up and facing the pain in her chest, "I DO NOT FEEL FOR HIM!"

She collapsed again as her mind threw more memories at her, her head pounding dangerously hard in sync with her heart. She grabbed her head with one hand, the other clutching her chest where her heart beat. This painful assault of memories that weren't hers crippled any attempt to move. She rode through the storm of her mind, fighting any persuasion to turn her human, struggling to fight through the seemingly never-ending flood of memory and visions. These false things slowly dug into her, her mind starting to weaken as they overpowered her.

"Nui, come up to the tower."

Her pain stopped as Lady Ragyo's voice chimed above her. Her mind relaxed and calmed, locking down whatever started the fire inside her body. Slowly she got back on to her feet, dusted off her

dress, collected her fraying mind and started her walk toward the elevators. She had to look calm for her creator.

Lady Ragyo was stand beside her desk when Nui arrived at her office loft, playing absently with her rainbow spools of basting threads. Nui caught her attention without speaking, her steps into the office making her creator turn to her with a smile.

"Nui, it's good to see you awake. Are you feeling better?"

"Was a feeling bad before I woke up? Well, it doesn't matter now~" Nui told her, walking calmly up to her, sitting on her desk with a smile. Ragyo looked at her proudly, moving back around her desk and calling over Hououmaru to fetch Gamagoori, only to have Nui explain that she had caught him being disrespectful and failing to follow commands. She gained praise from Lady Ragyo for making him learn, but still sent Hououmaru to check on him to ensure he didn't contract anything or fall ill.

"Does the dress fit well?" Lady Ragyo asked, rounding around Nui once before standing in front of her, chin in hand. Nui looked down at her dress, returning to her feet and twirling around for a moment.

"Yes, of course it does! It feels softer then usual, but it feels better this way."

"Good, good. Now how was your pet?"

Nui giggled softly, leaning on the desk again. "Well he was locked in his room for one, and refused to open it for me! Then he went on rambling about me losing my humanity, overall so negative about us, so I decided to have Hououmaru open it for me, dragged him to his original home, and beat him hopefully back into submission. He passed out after a while, but I must give him props for staying awake for so long. I'm sure I cracked a rib or two, and left so many pretty marks on his face!"

Lady Ragyo patted the top of her head. "I knew you could handle such a pet. I will assume progress on my Kamui is going well?"

Nui watched Lady Ragyo turn to the glass windows. "Of course! If anything, it's ahead of schedule. Another part is on the stand today, so we should be ready to start final prep before final assembly."

"Good. I'm glad to see everything is well. Now, I will be returning to my meeting in Europe, which has extended out for a few weeks due to complications suddenly arising. I expect you to behave yourself while I am gone, and to make sure no more issues arise, I will be keeping Hououmaru here in case of emergencies."

"Yep. Maybe I can break in my pet again in time for your return."

Hououmaru knew she wouldn't find Gamagoori safe and sound but the open wounds and blood covering his face was far worse than originally thought. She kept her first aid supplies close to hand as she started to clean up the wounds, gently moving him to get to difficult areas. She carefully put a bunched up towel under his head to keep his already injured head from more injury, and went to grab of spool of binding thread to help heal his wounds when he grabbed her arm, his eyes heavy with exhaustion and anguish.

"Hououmaru..."

"Don't move. You could be concussed from Nui's assault." She instructed him, grabbing her threads and pressing a bundle against one large cut under his eye, letting the threads spread and connect to the wound, healing it as quickly as the weak Life Fibers could. Gamagoori calmly let her work at healing the damage to his face, snuffing out any reaction as best he could, but she knew the process of healing through Life Fibers was painful to a point.

She plucked each bundle as their work completed, and shut her case. Her eyes wandered to his chest, knowing that there was

damage there, but did not want to push Gamagoori in the state he was in.

"Ragyo lied to her."

"To Nui?" Hououmaru prompted. He nodded gently, closing his eyes.

"She asked for no harm to come to me. Ragyo turned Nui back, and used a dirty loophole... to force Nui to become something she didn't want."

Hououmaru sat in silence.

"Seeing her forget everything... the complete wipe of her memory... hurts more than her attacks."

"Gamagoori..."

He ground his teeth as tears gathered again in his eyes. "And I don't understand why the worst pain is that she hates me again!"

Hououmaru understood, easily seeing what they could not. She kept her voice down for the moment, instead aiding him in sitting up as he made the move to, helping him lean against the wall without jarring his bruised ribcage too much. Hououmaru pressed to help him wrap them and help them heal. He adjusted once again and let Hououmaru work, fighting the urge to arch his back as she spread out the threads again to dig into him and start healing his bullied bones.

"Why don't you understand?" Hououmaru asked, piling several rolls of ace bandages out and plucking out several fasteners.

He looked conflicted for a moment. "I hated her, then each time I could free myself from her control, I found myself doubting what I saw. It must have been... the basting thread she put into me. I just knew she was better than what she was and..."

"... and now I miss the real Nui. The human Nui really is, the person Ragyo refuses to let free."

Hououmaru started wrapping her ace bandages around his torso, careful as she moved one arm around the small of his back. He moved enough that she could successfully wrap it around him.

"How did you break free from Ragyo's reset mind stitching?" she asked softly, "And do not worry about her finding out. I meant what I told you. I'm trying to help and she will be gone for a few weeks.

"You realize that you quite possibly like her more than you think?"

Gamagoori looked down at Hououmaru for a moment as she fastened the last clip on the binders around him, plucking the Life Fiber threads slowly poking through them as they finished their work in his body.

"Then I'll accept those facts... and fight for Nui's safe return to me."

Restart

Gamagoori knew he would be alone the moment Hououmaru left, sitting in the dark with a metal collar tied to the ground and only enough length of chain to stand and walk three steps toward the door. He settled in to the darkness, his only light a very dimmed lightbulb dangling above him, and even that did little to stray away the darkness that enveloped him.

He looked up at the bulb dangling above, wincing as pain shocked up his spine. He knew he had a spinal injury, but it seemed to be a small disk injury. He couldn't lean on his back without hurting himself, and the towel Hououmaru left him was his only help.

He couldn't sleep, and if he found sleep, he fell into night terrors, seeing Ragyo in every dark corner. There was nothing comfortable here, and Nui being forced under Ragyo's thumb is hurting him.

Nui... once his enemy and most feared combatant, the second ultimate evil to Lady Satsuki. The devil in pink fashion. Now he faced conviction in his feelings on her. He had opened Nui wide, revealing the human girl Nui had been. Seeing how she could be, the care and caution she put out for him, and the selflessness she put forth to keep him out of physical harm. Nui had drawn him in with her human qualities, and now all he wanted was to see her safe and sound, to see her human emotions and thoughts continued, to show her what it's like to be human again.

He wanted to have her back. He wanted the Nui he dug out of the darkness. He wanted his Nui back.

He grabbed the towel from his back, and bunched it up to make the makeshift pillow. Even with his spine disagreeing with his position, he laid out on the ground, gripping the towel with one hand and covering his face as he struggled to hide his tears and cries.

He hoped his heart could survive as long as his body.

Nui didn't sleep at all that night. She was able to survive with little sleep but this was not her natural needs taking effect. She couldn't close her eyes for along then a few minutes without being assaulted by memories not her own, same as the day had brought. Memories of her doubting herself, fighting new emotions that were not her own. Fighting the humanity that rose from nowhere.

Every dream, and every night terror filled her with grief and uneasiness. She would see Gamagoori countless times in her visions, smiling, being friendly, crying, being human, and no matter what she felt the same.

It's heresy, blasphemy. She did not feel human, and she wasn't human. She needed to banish these destructive thoughts before they infected her. She needed to keep her calm for everyone.

She sat up, threw the covers away, and opened her door, walking out in her nightgown toward the Sewing Rooms. More work on Shinra-Kouketsu would kill whatever false memories continued to play in her head. The door swung open for her and as stumbled in, grabbing for lengths of Life Fibers as she rounded the piece she had prepared for tomorrow. She twisted the Life Fibers around in her hand until she had a stable line to sew. She picked out a needle, threaded it, and went to work, her mind clearing as she progressed.

The uneasiness continued, only getting worse until her work grew crooked, and she had to undo all of her work and start over, repeating the progress several times until the line was straight, but even then, she noticed her work had covered the entire section she prepared, and there was no salvaging it without shredding the piece or fraying her Life Fiber thread.

Nothing was helping her. She needed a calm and clear mind. She couldn't do anything in this state. She slumped down to her knees in front of the table, unable to stop her tears. She gripped the metal

table hard enough to bend it under her fingers, the scraping of metal echoing in the empty room. She slumped down, her hands landing in front of her to prop her up as tears fell into tiny puddles between her hands.

She needed to fix this issue before her heart gave out on her.

Morning came through the crack in the cell door in front of him, opened by the familiar face of Hououmaru carrying his usual morning rations, which he knew were very little and not entirely fresh, but he took what he could. He had to be helped up off the ground, propped up against the wall as his tray of measly portions. Hououmaru took a seat in front of him as he dug in, eyeing him cautiously as he ate away at his 'breakfast'.

"You look much better then last night." she noted as he pushed back the empty tray. He ran a hand over his metal collar, grabbing his chain and pulling on it to lessen the pressure on his neck. It did very little, but he could breathe a bit easier.

"I won't be by nightfall if Nui comes back. I'll probably have more wounds."

"Then I'll return and patch you up as I did last night." Hououmaru immediately responded, grabbing the tray and pushing it from them, adjusting her spot before him, prompting him at last to speak on his confusion.

"I still do not understand. You stand with Ragyo, you want to see this Life Fiber takeover happen. Why do you even bother with all of this?"

Hououmaru didn't pause for a moment, answering immediately. She held her chin high, looking him in the eyes.

"When I took this job, I swore to uphold the care of Lady Ragyo and Nui. I joined very early on as an intern, and watched Nui turn from a truly rebellious and bubbly girl to the thing she is now. Ragyo forced

her happiness away in favor of her plans, as she did with Ryuuko. I have wanted to see Nui be better than what she became, but to do so would defy Lady Ragyo."

He adjusted himself again, grabbing the towel previously for propping his head to help with the pain in his spine. He leaned back against it, still up against the dungeon wall, but he was putting less stress on his back.

"Unlike Nui, I have no way out. I owe Lady Ragyo my life, and she has gladly collected on that debt. If I must stay under her thumb, I will follow her to the end. But if I can free Nui from this horror show, then I will try. You are the first person to ever show Nui the human she could be, and convince her to accept and thrive with it. With you, we could free her from the poison Lady Ragyo has fed her, but we need to have her finish Shinra-Kouketsu."

Gamagoori looked partly disgusted, somehow following her logic. Stuck with following Ragyo, she must do as she's told, and follow the path Ragyo has set with the Life Fibers for world domination and dismantlement. She stood loyal with her but her job also had her caring for Nui, and she had watched the human disappear in her. She wanted to complete her job and make Nui happy as she has for Ragyo, and he was her hope to help her get free, but she still had to keep her role as Ragyo's assistant without rising suspicion.

"Once it's finished, or close enough where Ragyo could finish it... you will help Nui and I escape?" he asked, piecing together the story.

"Absolutely. I know that I could abandon Lady Ragyo, but I simply can not leave anymore. I lost that chance long ago, but I do not want to see Nui suffer behind the life Ragyo forced her to take."

"And how would you know what horrors she faced?" he asked. Hououmaru sighed sadly.

"As I told you, I joined REVOCS early in my life. I started out as an intern under Lady Ragyo to observe the inner workings of REVOCS

for my first job. I got familiar with Lady Satsuki, and then met Nui during my early days. She was kind to me, expressed her amazement at my looks and color. She was a curious, but fiery five years old with a will of her own and a passionate heart and mind. She quickly clung to me when Lady Ragyo would come for her.

"One day, the date of her sixth birthday, everything changed. Nui turned darker, more inhuman. She gave off a very cheery, happy aura that I knew was fake. She was not kind, and did not care for the word of others. She grew hostile toward me whenever I asked why she changed, then fed me an obviously made-up story on why, a script even. She was forced to change, to be this doll for Lady Ragyo's vision."

Hououmaru directed her attention elsewhere, trying to collect herself from the memory recollection. Gamagoori let her, and tried to wrap his head around the story. Forced at such a young age to accept her so-called 'duty'. It was similar to Lady Satsuki's case, however Nui was forced to take this role, while Lady Satsuki accepted hers with open arms.

"The question now, Gamagoori, is will you let me help you survive these next days or weeks until this plan can come to effect?"

Gamagoori stood with little difficulty, the bruises unable to be healed barely ringing out in pain as he moved. He helped Hououmaru off the ground and took a quick deep breath.

"Will you report about my attempts to free Nui from Ragyo's tighter grasp?"

"No."

"Will you report on my escape from the stitching she put into me?"

"No."

"And will you try to help me in my attempts to return Nui to who she was?"

"As I have tried all these years, yes."

He nodded and offered his hand again, a formal handshake. "Then I agree to these terms, Rei Hououmaru. If this frees her and myself, then I accept. We will find ourselves enemies if this works."

Hououmaru gladly shook his hand, smiling. "Then do not hold back if we fight. Once this Kamui is complete, you will need everyone to defeat her."

"I look forward then to that revenge."

Nui woke up before the systems released the Sewing Club members to continue, quickly trying to fix last night's mishap with her current section of Shinra-Kouketsu, but the piece was destroyed and unsalvageable, resulting in its disposal into the Original Life Fiber. She had her minions immediately work on replacing the failed piece, and left them to their work.

She couldn't calm down, and she was exhausted on top of it. She had to kill these thoughts and emotions. She needed to make sure that this would never happen again. This fire within her had to end.

She would have to snuff out the source, and she smiled wickedly as she walked toward her pet's dark, small cell, opening the door and finding him propped against the wall, rubbing his bruised wrists. He found her eyes and watched her cautiously as she closed the door, moving one hand to the wall, his chains rattling against the concrete floor.

"Good morning, pet."

She saw him flinch, and immediately did not care for his insolence, backhanding him when he did not immediately respond. He scooted

against the wall, clutching his throbbing cheek as she stepped up to him, kneeling down to his level.

"I said good morning, pet."

"Good... morning, Nui..."

Another backhanded slap hit him hard on the other cheek, Nui's excitement growing at his failure to comply to his master's commands. "Good morning...?"

"L-lady Nui."

Her smile broke free. "There we are! Your face is already swelling... oh well, you can still talk. I wonder though if you can talk with these on your face."

Nui's sharpened nails came up to poke him in the left cheek, the little barbs under each perfectly filed nail snagging a little bits of his skin, leaving tiny trails of blood as she ran her right hand over his face. He hissed as they ran down his face, but she did not care. He could hiss, cry, and scream all he wanted but it would not stop her from hurting him into absolute submission.

He closed an eye as she ran her nails up to his eye, tapping the eyelid and she dragged her nails full force down his face, earning a yelp and plead for a stop from him. Blood fell down beautifully down his face, hitting her hand. She flicked it away without thought until she reached his chin, and looked into his eyes, seeing him try to ignore the pain.

"Such an amusing face, so pained yet so calm," Nui hummed, lifting his head to ensure his eyes were locked with hers, "I think I'll change it."

She raised her other hand, digging her thumb nail directly into his right cheek, drawing blood at the first push. His whimpers did nothing but excite her as she dragged her nail across his face, slashing it

away when she was satisfied by the wound. She watched as tears fell from the corners of his shut eyes, trailing down with the blood still dripping down his cuts.

"For something so disobedient, you know when to shut up. Why wouldn't you do that earlier? You would have never ended up here."

She brushed away a tear with a quick flick of an index finger, another thing line cutting into his cheeks. His gaze turned warm, and she pulled her hands away from him like he was dirty and diseased.

"I'm not wrong. I know you're in there." he told her, smiling through his tears and pain, "You can fight her."

"Tsk. You have to start that crap again." Nui growled, raising her fist and immediately slamming it into his face, grabbing his chain and yanking him back straight so she could punch him again and again, grabbing his face when he finally started to beg her to stop, her nails digging into him again.

"There is no mercy for *disgusting, emotional* humans like you!"

"Please, mommy, please stop! IT HURTS!"

Nui's arm stalled mid-throw, but continued downward, the punch landing against his jaw. She continued and continued until she rose her fist high and mighty, ready to knock him out.

"YOU DESERVE NOTHING BUT PAIN AND MISERY!"

"Waaaaaah!"

"Stop that now! A person as important and valuable as you should not shed such pointless tears! This is nothing compared to what will come later, my dear, so learn to deal with the pain!"

Four hours. Four hours of constant ripping at her skin, watching muscle and blood rip and tear only to return to normal. The pain hurt,

it hurt so much. She wanted mommy to stop hurting her, skin didn't peel like this.

"Mommy, stop! It hurts, it hurts! My skin doesn't peel like THAAAAAAAHH! STOP IT, STOP IT, STOP IT!"

Her hand came down on her face hard, sending her into whimpering silence. Nevertheless, Ragyo continued her work, ignoring her please of cease.

"Be QUIET. If you squirm another inch, I will rip off this skin completely, so shut up, and stay silent. Your cries and tears will not change what you are, my beautiful pet."

"I did nothing, I did nothing! Please stop hurting me!"

"You are not human! This does not hurt you, now calm yourself and sit back down now."

"NO! I am a human, mommy! Look at me, I am one and always will be. DON'T HIT ME, PLEASE!"

"THIS IS FOR YOUR OWN GOOD, YOU ROTTEN BRAT!"

Her arm froze mid-air. Her entire being shuddered to a stand still, blood dripping from her fists. Her breath came in angry huffs, her eyes widened in disbelief at the bruised and beaten Gamagoori before her, tears falling down across his marred face. He looked scared of her, frightened of her. His fear came vocally as she stalled, the painful memory from her past pulling her away from the violence she forced on him.

"Y-you said... that you never wanted me hurt... ever again. That you... would do anything... to keep me out... of h-harm."

"I don't ever want to see you hurt... never again." "Hurt me... all you want, break me until I'm nothing, just please... please do not harm him." "As long... as he's safe... I'm alright with the pain and torture."

"I. AM. HUMAN!"

Her gasp of surprise came as the Mind Stitching binding her snapped in several places, freeing her memories from the smoke and mirrors Ragyo had created. Her slow return to humanity, her feelings and emotions for him, his continued attempts to show her what she could be. Her need to keep him safe from harm, and Ragyo's discovery of Nui's blatant defiance. The continued abuse and assault at the hands of Lady Ragyo, fighting to keep her away from him, from having him *hurt*. All the pain and misery she took for him, to make sure nothing painful came to him.

Here she was, going against her own promise. She shuddered again, dropping her arms, and letting out a squeak as she muffled a sob, tears escaping her eye. She slowly sank down until she rested on his lap, hands bloodied by her beatings held together in front of her.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! What have I..."

Large, warm arms rounded her, pulling her flush against his chest. Although bruised and marked in cuts and claw lines, he comforted her. She set her head against a shoulder, crying softly into it as the Mind Stitching that rebooted her into her old self fell away, and her new human self returned. She clung to his chest tighter as she felt the Life Fibers around his mind give away.

"Forgive me, Gamagoori... please forgive me for hurting you, I didn't... I'm sorry."

He slowly pulled Nui away from his shoulder, holding her head in his hands. His right thumb carefully brushed away her tears, sobs charging through her body.

"... I forgive you. I forgive you, Nui."

She sobbed hard, cupping his hands as a smile broke through, even as her voice cracked. "Thank you."

She moved her arms again so she was against his chest tightly again, resting her head in the junction between his neck and right shoulder, against his collar, hands rested against his chest. His arms tightened around her lightly, adjusting his legs so Nui was firmly tucked to his chest. He glanced at her as she relaxed into him, eyes peeking at him from the guise of her free hair.

He took a brave step, closed his eyes, and left a soft kiss on top of her head. Immediately, Nui found herself blushing. She pushed her hair out-of-the-way, looking up at him as he flushed lightly.

"Why would you..." Nui questioned, watching him look away in embarrassment for a moment.

"I don't really know why."

Nui sat up, her face closer than expected to him. Her blush stayed strong as she eyed his embarrassment, turning away for a moment before looking at her again. Neither moved toward the other, simply staring at each other until Gamagoori cleared this throat, blood smearing against the hand he raised to cover it. He didn't speak, wiping the blood on his hands against the wall. Nui dug into her dress, pulling out a handkerchief, and silently started to clean the blood from his wounds. He watched her with amazement as she took the time to clean everything, making sure that he wasn't a bloody mess.

"I'm sorry I didn't break free before I did this to you." Nui reiterated as she drew away, "I broke my promise."

He grabbed her retreating hand, pulling it up to his shoulder. The arm snaked around her waist as she rested against him, looking up at him as he neared her again, pressing a firmer kiss on her forehead.

"You broke free from Ragyo. That's all that matters. To me, your promise was never broken."

Broken Dreams

Nui jumped into worry mode quickly, ripping the chains and collar off of him and gently leading him back to the familiar scenery of her room, immediately pulling weak Life Fibers out to heal the cuts and the mistakes she needed to fix. Her touch was gentle and light, worried about every instance they connected. Gamagoori watched Nui's face flash with uncountable conflicting emotions, worry clouding her eye as she worked to close and heal every wound he had on his face and body. When Nui was satisfied with his well-being, she immediately walked up to him, cuddling against his chest. She didn't want him to see her face, and curled up against him as he worriedly looked at her. He kept his arms at his sides, keeping his knees apart to let her kneel between his legs on the edge of her bed.

"I'm sorry, Ira..."

Gamagoori sighed, his arms moving to wrap around her. "I know you are, Nui. It's okay. It's over."

"Is it though? Ragyo will come back and repeat this horrible cycle of enslaving us. I don't want to do it again, I refuse to go through it again."

Gamagoori ran a soothing hand over her back, keeping his calm as Nui struggled to keep her new-found troubles in check. Every pent-up emotion and thought had come out in a flood after she was freed from Ragyo's heinous ensnarement. Instability struck her hard, the loss of coping with her new human workings affecting her thoroughly. Even after barely making it to her room without shaking in an emotional down spiral, she focused on his care, his pain, not caring for her worry-etched face and unsteady hands. Even now, she softly shook in his arms.

"I don't feel okay." she admitted, "I feel sick. I don't like it at all."

He couldn't stop his smile. He was glad she was vocal about it. He carefully scooted over, turning himself until Nui hit the soft bedtop, looking up at Gamagoori as he stared down at her, brushing her hair out of her face. With her freedom went her hair bow as well, broken into pieces. It had been a source of Ragyo's control, and shattered on her release from it.

"It's okay, Nui. Getting used to these emotions and thoughts again won't be easy, and you won't like the feelings you'll feel most of the time. For now, some sleep should benefit you. You look like you haven't slept in a while."

She looked away for a moment. "I couldn't sleep... because my memories were slipping through her hold, and at the time it ripped me apart. Sleep was a labyrinth for me, and it didn't help. I haven't slept in over twenty-four hours."

He leaned down, and gently rested his forehead on hers. "Then get some sleep. You need it as much as I do."

"Will you stay?" she asked quickly, one hand grabbing his shoulder, "I... don't want to be alone."

"Of course I'll stay. I want to help you recover from this."

Nui found comfort in the real world, but horrors in her dream world. Memories long locked or hidden returned to the surface, many from her long days in her mother's labs, going through inhuman experiments and tests, and an uncountable amount of blood and screams used and wasted. The blurry images of her treasured moments with Satsuki and Gamagoori faded into horrible memories with Ragyo, being beaten and dragged by her hair, screaming for help as she was given her 'just rewards' for her actions in her tests and evaluations. She was beaten if she resisted, or said no to any advances Ragyo made.

She woke up screaming, Gamagoori immediately beside her, begging for her to talk to him, but she couldn't spit out what horrors haunted her where she went. She couldn't have him worry about her. She had to stand on her own, learn how to be human again. She needed to do it alone.

She was going insane from the past grabbing her by the throat, but if she kept him safe, she would accept insanity with welcoming arms. Two days passed, and she had only caught about two hours of sleep that wasn't filled his dreams. She could feel her fatigue as she finished one more piece of Shinra-Kouketsu, tying of the end of her thread and doing final inspection to make sure her need for sleep did not affect her work. With no mistakes seen, she moved the piece on to the large stand with the others, proudly looking up at the large Kamui.

She needed to only complete it. She needed to give her creator what she asked.

She stumbled out of the Sewing room with little alertness, wandering the halls before Gamagoori found her as he always did. She needed to sleep, but her past was determined to keep her from sleeping at all. Through her half-awake wandering, she stumbled out into the graveyard again, sunset closing some of the flowers lining the rows of tombstones. With the last concentrated amount of alertness, she took the courtesy of taking off her shoes and socks, setting them by the door to take in fully the area.

She pushed the weeping willow's leaves away and gladly collapsed in the soft tall grass, curling up in the comfort of the sweet-smelling sanctuary. Her eyes fell quickly as the quiet and lack of sleep pulled her under, and briefly blessed her with a dreamless sleep. However, her nightmares returned, taking an entirely new form.

The sight was disgusting, but she was forced to watch it happen. IF she closed her eyes, she was beaten until they opened.

Gamagoori with Ragyo. He fell under her heel in exchange for her 'freedom'. He took the malicious beatings and physical work, the experiments and evasive operations. He took everything from Ragyo, including her touch.

She never got her freedom, but Gamagoori would never know. He was so entirely tied under Ragyo's control, he didn't even recognize her. He saw her as an animal, a failure. He would spit cruel, poisonous words at her, treat her like a filthy pest. Caged, collared, and beaten like a common slave.

She watched Ragyo sneer at her as she walked away from her home in her cage, keeping Gamagoori close to her with a touch of a hand on his back. He spoke something to Ragyo, but Nui could not understand it. He stopped just before they reached her only light source, the open door to her dungeon. He turned to her, eyes shadowed in malice.

"IRA, PLEASE!"

He blinked, refusing to answer her pleas. She struggled against her collar keeping her in place, but reached a broken hand out to him through the bars, choking herself as she reached for her light, her savior, the one person who could open her from her malicious shell.

"IRA PLEASE DON'T ABANDON ME!"

He seemed to look at her better, eye narrowing as he strained his eyes to see through the din and dark. She struggled to keep herself where she knelt, trying to reach farther, to claw further out of the cage. She needed to keep him from Ragyo.

"Ira please... don't... I need you, please. I can't lose you."

"I can leave you." he bitterly bit back, "You did the same thing, and you will feel how I felt."

She cried out. "I MADE MISTAKES, I COULDN'T DECIDE FOR MYSELF! Please Ira, you're... you're precious to me. I need you to show me how to be human again! Please don't lock me in the dark!"

He smiled darkly at her, walking up to her cage, and knelt inches from her wriggling hand. Although bones were broken in her hand, she refused to let the pain stop her. He gently took hold of it in both hands, looking at her as tears fell down her face.

"You will learn the hard way then how I felt when you locked me in the dark."

He crushed the remainder of her fingers, her howl of pain echoing around her as he stood and turned to leave, following Ragyo's offered hand as they walked out of the room, closing the door behind her and plunging Nui into the dark.

"I DON'T WANT TO BE IN THE DARK ANYMORE! LET ME OUT!"

She knew she couldn't get free. She slumped to the ground, barely able to lift her broken body off the cold steel floor of the cage. Her arm dangled still outside of her cage, her hand useless. Even with her Life Fibers, her hand wouldn't work for a long time. The dark consumed her as she sobbed.

"I don't want to be alone anymore... Ira... please don't leave me. I need my humanity with me."

She woke up in so much fright and fear she couldn't even scream. She curled up into herself as her body reacted violently to the horrible dream, shaking so hard she fell to her side, landing back into the grass. She couldn't move, she couldn't do anything more than shake and suffer through her panic attack. There was no help for her.

She had to fight this on her own. She knew that, but she couldn't do it. She could fight anything.

She couldn't fight herself.

Her tears came quickly and in rivers, and she sobbed in one hand as she tried to cry out the remainder of her frantic emotions, failing quickly as her cries and gasps for breath grew louder, her body scrambling to pick up the pieces it scattered to the wind. She clutched her chest as it heaved with each gasping breath and cry she gave, unable to hide over overwhelming fear and anguish.

Years and years of squashed emotions assaulting her all at the same time, and she feared she wouldn't come out in one piece once it ended.

She didn't like these overbearing emotions, the crippling effect they had, but she knew that it would be rough to acclimate back into a human being. If this was part of that journey, she would need to traverse it as best she could, but she knew she would get lost, easily killed, under such conditions. She could lose herself entirely if she didn't learn to control them.

She needed her anchor, her humanity, to be there for her.

She found some calm in the storm, opening her eyes and look toward the slowly opening door, her emotions settling enough to slowly sit up to present her rather unstable self. She probably looked like a mess, but Gamagoori had seen her in much worse conditions. He walked calmly through the headstones, his face masked by shadow. She pushed away her hair, loose from its drill style, and rubbed away tears as he parted the curtain of tree leaves and sat beside her, her body leaning in toward him and resting on his arm.

"I had a feeling you would come here." he told her, looking down at her as closed her eyes. She nodded softly, not denying that it had become a preferred place of rest and relaxation.

"It's peaceful here. It's easy to think."

Gamagoori brushed some of her hair out of her face, getting her to look up at him, tears and all out of him to see.

"You were crying."

Her eyes crinkled as tears fell again. She didn't accept his attempt to brush them away, instead crawling up against him until she had her arms wrapped around his neck, her face pressed into his shoulder.

"I haven't cried, or been emotional, for over twelve years. I'm going to cry a lot, but I will also be happy, and relieved, and thankful.

"I'll be sad one moment, and angry the next, then I'll suddenly want to cry and then I'll be laughing. I'm a little girl again, learning life-long lessons. It's going to take my willpower... and your guidance."

He sighed and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her closer to him. She adjusted her spot so she was comfortably in his lap like a small child, lying against his chest. He gently laid back, lying out in the grass with Nui beside him, one hand trailing down until it found his right hand, sliding into it with ease. She looked up at him as she laced her fingers into his, smiling at him as he did the same. She yawned for a moment, her tired mind grabbing for sleep, and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Get some sleep, Nui. I'll be here when you wake up."

She smiled once more before letting her eyelids fall, and diving back into the dark of sleep.

The door opened again, slowly leaking in light which she hadn't seen in who knows how long. At first it felt like she was being physically burned by the bright light, trying to get away from the pain and light, whimpering as the pain shocked up through her spine. The door creaked open a little farther before a shadowed figure walked in, blocking the harsh light from Nui. As the dimmed lights above her

flickered on, the door closing with a slam, she waited for the attack to come, the oily voice of Ragyo taunting her as she beat her.

Nothing came, and her eyes opened to a sight never imaginable.

Gamagoori, unhurt, untouched, smiling at her. Just smiling, knelt beside her cage, looking at her with gentle eyes.

She scooted farther from the bars, trying to get away. This was a trick, a game. Gamagoori was under Ragyo's control, there was no way he was himself. Her light couldn't be free.

"Nui..."

"You're trying to hurt me." She whimpered. He wasn't really here.

"I'm not."

"Ragyo sent you here, she's trying to hurt me by putting what I need in front of me!"

He turned to her, his smile disappearing. "Ragyo doesn't know I'm here!"

"She does... you're going to hurt me... everything I wanted to keep safe was taken from me. She wouldn't let you go like this."

She didn't hide her tears, or her emotions. She knew he was there to do so, to hurt her more than Ragyo could ever do. She knew how she felt for him, how she needed him in a time of weakness, and how she could hurt her with him. There was no other reason why he would be here besides Ragyo sending him to hurt her by being right there for her, and walking away once she got close enough. She watched him carefully as his face fell at her coarse words.

He stood up, rounding the cage until he reached her chains, tied to the other wall to ensure she couldn't get free by breaking them. She watched him with disbelief as he broke her binds, letting her breath and move normally for the first time in weeks. She tested her

movement, finding no resistance from her chains. She watched carefully as he returned to his original spot, holding out a hand through the bars of the cage.

"You don't have to worry about Ragyo anymore, Nui. I won't let her hurt you."

She scooted closer, but still out of reach. Her hands nervously flexed beside her, wanting to grab his hand, wanting to believe this was real, but it still looked like a cleverly hidden attack.

"I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

Nui looked him in the eyes, her tears continuing. "You."

She could see him flinch, and try to cover it up. She knew it hurt him, but she did not regret letting it off her chest.

"I fear you because you hold my heart in your hands, and can hurt me if you want."

She scooted closer, watching his hand slowly slink back, beginning its withdrawal out of the cage. She reached out and gently grabbed his hand, keeping her eyes down as she reached the bars of her cage, grasping his offered hand.

"Please promise me you won't hurt me again." she asked, finally looking at him again as his expression changed, his smile returning, his hand squeezing hers with warmth.

"I would never hurt you, Nui. I promise."

Leashed No More

Gamagoori knew she would have a hard time accepting, evolving and learning her emotions. For someone to go from cold, cruel, and apathetic to become human again, to have life handed back to her, she was taking the hard end of her emotional recovery, and taking it not too well. She struggled with her memories first, the razor-sharp emotions collected within years of harassment, torture, suffering, and assimilation into a world so cold it froze her heart burning her from the inside out. She spent long drags of time trying to fight the guilt and pain from her childhood, trying to dig past the dark to find the lighter emotions she needed, but found no safe place in the memories flooding her.

She faced not just herself, but Ragyo at every turn even though she still was on business outside of Japan. Her memories evolved her imprint of Ragyo, and she saw her around every corner. Anger followed by fear, followed by outright fury, ending in a crippling blanket of despair and emptiness. She hated her, wanted to push her away, but guilt and fear controlled her at the moment, Ragyo's influence and power keeping her working on Shinra-Kouketsu, and keeping her from breaking every rule put upon her.

He found her working diligently in the sewing hall, stitching together a large piece beside the larger than life stand of the ultimate Kamui, lacing Life Fibers all around it to hold it in place with its identical pieces. She swung beside the massive in-production piece by Life Fibers acting as a sort of sling, her feet pushing it apart as she moved around the piece to ensure its stability. After securing one piece, she tugged on one end of her sling and moved it until she could hover beside the next one, throwing Life-Fiber loaded needles around, sticking through several metal beams to ensure that the heavy Kamui was secured all around. As the needles fell, he caught them one by one, knowing that it would let Nui relax quicker after finishing the next sections of Ragyo's Kamui.

When she came down from the rafters that supported her work, she smiled as she found him waiting for her, setting her sewing needles on the large prep table and kindly escorting her out of the room, Nui accepting his offered arm. She knew they would stop and take time to relax in the graveyard, returning to her room only when the sun started to set, and go back inside and somehow gravitate back into her room, Gamagoori making sure she had support when her memories ignited fiery nightmares.

She felt her spirits fall a little further as they walked. She knew that she should be happy, that having peace and quiet with him without Ragyo's constant gaze on her back was a blessing but she felt low, and she knew why with a clear conscience.

The way Gamagoori was acting recently had her worried about something, something big. He had devoted time to make sure she was alright and calm, always by her side when she woke from her memories hurting her or her emotions twisting her dreams into deadly nightmares. He devoted free time outside of training and muscle conditioning to her, never missing a chance to make sure she was alright, or had something to do, keeping her distracted.

It seemed unlike him to be so focused on her. It worried her that something was happening behind closed doors to him.

"Gamagoori, you haven't train in a few days, right?"

He stopped, turning toward her with a look of intrigue. "No, I haven't, and you haven't seen my improvement either?"

She shook her head, and took her arm back as they detoured to the training room, Nui taking her place up above to have an aerial view of his work, with little notice, she started up his previous level of training, watching with rising curiousness as the simulation kept him back as his enemies rose from the floor one by one, revealing robotic training dummies purposely dressed to perfection as humans to give him the feeling of a realistic fight. It was an improvement over the original animatronics he had fought earlier on, leaving less

wounds and reducing the risk of internal injuries. Even with the human look, he shredded through them like paper, going through one after another with ease, precision, and skill, muscles and fists tightening and flying around like loaded guns. He tore and slaughtered the normal cannon fodder, using pieces from downed enemies to aid him, proving his skillset in adapting to his environment.

He made quick work of the last section of fighters, and moved on through the town setting for the simulation. He found and executed a smaller enemy with a quick kick to its shin, and slamming its metal skull into the side of a building, moving quickly as the robot sputtered and died behind in the dust. He looked beastly the way he fought, and Nui found herself on her feet, leaning forward to watch his improvement work its best.

'Prepare for final boss.'

Nui watched the data on the boss appear, her eyes catching who it mirrored. She returned to the battlefield as the final boss appeared in front of Gamagoori, brandishing her weapons and taking an offensive pose.

Mako Mankanshoku, at least as close as they could get to her. Wearing a similar uniform to her so-called Two-Star Goku Uniform, slightly downgraded but retaining weapons, the Mako animatronic called out to Gamagoori, the mechanical eyes brightening in a false show of emotion. Nui waited for his sputter, his hesitation and denial to try to kill her.

Nothing of the sort happened. He bared his teeth, and swung at Mako without hesitation, immediately trying to hit vital points. Nui watched in horror as the two exchanged blows and kicks, several times sending each other through buildings or breaking the surroundings around them, making the fighting field look like a tornado had gone through it. As Mako started to take too much damage, Gamagoori grabbed hold of the uniform Mako donned and swung her around, putting her in a place of increased vulnerability,

and slammed his fist into her face. As the animatronic cried out in a ear-piercing, painful cry, he continued to beat it until the fake skin broke and revealed the metal exoskeleton and plates, and sending his fist through it, sending every last bit of electronics out the other side of its head.

He had no reaction at all to seeing Mako. Not even a flinch, or a stutter step, not even a mumble of a word. He went wild on her, no mercy or remorse.

This couldn't be the real Gamagoori.

He looked up at her, giving a toothy smile, his voice strong even with the space between them, his pride slipping through his excitement.

"I should be ready to fight in the field in a week or so!"

She could only smile falsely back to him, giving him approval for his improvement, because behind her smile her heart starting to crack at the center as her worst fear came to life.

After getting him cleared for injuries, outside of his fair share of cuts and bruises alongside the small scars left behind from Nui's temporary vicious treatment, they continued on wandering through Honnouji Academy, taking their time as they went back toward her room, the sun starting to set on another day. She couldn't bring herself to reach out to him, taking his hand as she always did, and walk and talk about how she could control her emotions and learn to control her memories.

Her hands clenched aside her instead, prompting Gamagoori to look toward her as she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself before she acted on an impulse that had nearly took her whole. She nodded at him after collecting herself, letting him silently know she was alright, and they continued on in a growing pregnant silence. Nui bit her cheek as she struggled to capture her voice again, needing to do what was needed before she lost her chance.

"Gamagoori, there's something I would like to do once we get to my room." she finally told him, grabbing an arm to stop his walk. She knew he could see her worry and seriousness, his emotions flashing everywhere across the scale on his face. He nodded, agreeing with her, and they quickened their pace to make it there. She watched him look at her with careful consideration, following her instructions as she asked him to take a seat on her bed, crawling behind him and putting her hands on his head, drawing his curiosusness out of the bag.

"What are you doing?" he asked gently as she dug her fingers into his hair, ever so often dragging her nails against his scalp. It made Gamagoori shiver under her gentle scraping, but she knew it was not out of pain. Even now, the threads latched on to his mind started to respond to her touch and call, her Life Fibers vibrating through her fingers. She knew that she could not save him through human means, and would only ever use them for this purpose.

"Something important. Are you alright sitting up like this for a bit?"

He looked up oddly at her, not quite convinced or happy with her answer. She continued to comb through his hair, not telling another word on her intents. He let her work quietly a little longer until let her hands fall to his shoulders, a sigh escaping her as she rested her chin on top of his head, thinking for a moment.

She knew what she needed to do, but was she willing to let her first friend, no her anchor and humanity, her reason for continuing on, go and continue on a life better than one he would be destined to if he followed her to the end. She sighed again. She knew she would have to let him free.

She didn't want to see him hurt, and continuing on with her would hurt him in the end. She knew it could hurt her forever if she let go, but he deserved freedom much more than her.

"Do you want to lay down, or something? I don't want you to feel uncomfortable." she asked, poking her head over his shoulder. His

confusion and curiosity built up higher, and he finally found his voice again.

"What exactly are you doing, Nui? Please let me know."

She moved back behind him, her hands moving through his hair, pieces sliding out of his slicked-back style. She kneaded through it several times, obviously stalling until she stopped, nails tapping against his head.

"I'm removing the Life Fibers out of you. You're not free, and I'm finally letting you go."

Gamagoori was stunned into silence. He felt like himself, he thought like himself. He swore his thoughts were free from Life Fiber control. He had broken through Nui's guise and Ragyo's guise, and saw Nui finally break through hers. He felt normal. He didn't feel any restraint on his thoughts, emotions or actions. How was he still under Life Fiber's regime, under its sickening influence?

"I don't understand. I fought through them, I shouldn't be under their control anymore." He told her, looking over his shoulder, watching as her face fell, eyes betraying her sadness.

Nui's gentle, sorrowful sigh followed her bodily reaction to his words, grief starting to drip through her veins. Her fingers ran through his hair again, gently catching the threads poking out of the surface. They responded to her like a child to its mother, and she knew what power they held over him. While her grief grew, she stored away her anger at Ragyo for later.

"Ragyo made it that way. She did this, she made you act like this. Her Life Fibers are making sure your real personality isn't given chances to escape. This isn't you, the Gamagoori who hates me, who resents me, who would rather see me killed for my past actions. Right now, I'm going to make up for those mistakes, and take whatever Ragyo put into you out for good!"

She didn't want to in the slightest. It would mean she would see what Gamagoori truly thought of her, his real reactions to her. She promised herself she would not resist him if she tried to hurt him, or try to stop him if he wanted to flee back to Nudist Beach and Satsuki. He deserved his freedom more than she did. She had done enough damage to him, and it was time to have him out of Ragyo's ever deadly crosshairs. He froze under her touch, but did not push her away or speak. He did scoot farther up the bed, Nui quickly moving aside for him to move, and turned around so he was facing her, eyes soft with worry and warmth.

"Go ahead." he told her, giving the go-ahead to free him. She blinked away her tears, and reached up to his head again, carefully plucking out strings of the Mind Stitching, a tangle of red fibers lacing around her fingers. She could see him look up, trying to catch a glimpse of the web of Life Fibers sticking out of him, just moments from their removal forever. Nui collected up the last pieces she needed for removal, and hesitated.

One tug, and it would be gone. One pull, and freedom long needed would be granted.

She looked him in the eyes, and gently leaned in to him, taking one last quick kiss before she forced herself to keep away, tears burning in her eyes as she backed away, fighting to not react to Gamagoori's pained reaction.

"I love you, and I will never forget your warmth and acceptance, Ira!"

She pulled hard, left and right, ripping the web apart and pulling the Mind Stitching out of its snug place on his mind, tangling in her fingers like a sticky spider web, glowing and vibrating angrily as it lost connection. He stilled and shuddered as they left him, several gasps following their removal as his mind, memories, and thoughts returned to normal. She knew it would not be a kind gaze when he recovered enough to react, hate and anger boiling in his eyes as they opened. Even though her heart cracked open, she found the heart to try to smile, only to watch him regain his memories, his face

transforming into one of pure anger. She closed her eyes, tears falling as she heard a guttural growl escape him. She knew it would happen, and knew what came next.

She let his fist hit her upside the head, and accepted the darkness that followed, her tears following her down as she fell into unconscious black depths.

She woke to a freezing cold bed, and dead silence. She picked herself up numbly, her mind frozen as she realized what she had truly done, and received in return.

She knew he needed to get free before Ragyo returned, but all she could feel was crippling sorrow and emptiness.

The small light at the end had gone dark. She had no way out, and no one who could help her. She was alone again in her dark corner.

She scooted to the edge of the bed, but did not dismount. She froze, feeling the very dull warmth of where he had been, still imprinted into the sheets. The last bit of physical evidence that he was ever here with her.

Helping her, opening her up, changing her in so many ways, and finally freeing her from her poisonous, inhuman cage and finding her humanity. Her healer and savior, the one person who dared try to touch her heart, who stole it from her as he wholeheartedly tried to keep her safe, sane, and secure, away from Ragyo's humiliating touch and disgusting gaze. The human who showed her the steps to be human again.

The Gamagoori she thought was real, who cared for her. All this time, since her release from Ragyo's strings, was a lie to burn her more. The real human hated her, and took his freedom and ran when he got it. No thank you, no apology. Simply rage and anger, and a quick 'goodbye' attack.

She didn't care that her heart was set to death, shattered to pieces by the person who showed her it, the painful beating in her chest a simple reminder of the pain of his leave. She clutched at her chest, feeling her frantic, heaving heartbeats under her palm. It could beat out of her chest if it wanted to, she didn't mind.

She wasn't human after all, right?

A New Kind Of Leash

She filled her silence with uninterrupted work, trying to fill the void left behind in the wake of his disappearance with her objective to compete Ragyo's Ultimate Kamui. She had lost count of the hour, but she knew she had worked since she woke after he punched her and left, approximately six hours ago. She hadn't come down for food or breaks, or to collect her sewing needles as they fell to the ground as she secured the growing Kamui to the metal beams around the entire frame. She didn't even dare stop after attaching the needed rocket material at the bottom of the frame for final assembly, minor oil stains soaking into the skirt of her dress and forearm covers. She kept working to keep herself from thinking, from feeling. It kept the thought of her loss at bay, but still burning in the back of her throat, tears falling as she worked from time to time. She would let them fall, only wiping them when they obscured her vision, or dropped on to the fabric she sewed. Otherwise, she worked until she had the Kamui in its final assembly stages before its final leg of work: final coloration and dye, Life Fiber activation, and final assembly.

She heard the door to her workspace open, but did not look down in fear that her mind would show her *him*. She finished tying together one last piece on the hood of the Kamui, making minor adjustments to the currently grey fabric to ensure it would look right when colored and finished.

"So you're still working?"

Nui looked down at Hououmaru, blinking back tears as the secretary looked up at her, setting a bag down on her sewing table.

Nui bit her lip, her emotions firing at pistons as Hououmaru offered a hand toward whatever was in the bag. She brushed away her tears again before finally ascending down, taking a seat on top of the table, a few feet from Hououmaru. She knew she looked horrible in

the woman's eyes but she knew if she continued to work no matter what she would be safe, and he would be safe from harm. If it meant giving up some cosmetic appearances, she would give them all away to keep him out of Ragyo's claws once again.

"I'm surprised you weren't with Gamagoori." Hououmaru told her, opening the bag and offering Nui one of the small bento boxes within. Although reluctant, Nui took it, opened it, and dug in quickly, hoping that her eating would curb any conversation, or at least responses at best. Her guilt at not revealing what happened ate at her, until she set her partly eaten lunch down and finally found the voice to say it.

"He left."

Hououmaru almost dropped her lunch. "What?! He left?"

Nui curled up into herself, resting her chin on her knees. "I... He was still under Ragyo's control, and I freed him. When he returned to himself, he knocked me out, and left without saying goodbye... or returning what he had given for so long."

Hououmaru's face fell as Nui's tears escaped, a hiccup following a small sob. She rubbed her eyes again, trying to collect herself to explain better, but her sorrow took hold, and did not let go. She curled up tighter, letting her legs soak in the cries and sobs, along with her tears as she let out her sorrow.

"I thought he would stay, that he wouldn't hate me, but... but he was so angry... so furious at me. I hoped he would forgive me, and remember what he'd done to help me but all he did was hit me and leave!"

"I know that he would... that he would take his freedom but... I just wished he would have gone with something kinder. A word, a phrase, a hug, anything that remained from the time where he was kind to me, when he cared about me. I just wished he would have said goodbye!"

She sunk farther into her emotional stupor, hearing nothing but his anger and feeling nothing but pain alongside the constant running of sewing machines below them. Her heart barely beat in her chest, damaged and lost within a cloud of despair. She knew it was eventual that he would leave or be freed, but she just wished that he had said goodbye or gave her some peace of mind before he left. She looked up as she felt Hououmaru run a gentle hand over her knee.

"How long has he been gone?" she asked, looking into Nui's darkened eye. Nui uncurled from her fetal position protection, but did not move from the table, instead adjusting for comfort.

"Hours ago. I don't know how many... he would be out of the city by now, and long gone, Rei. I lost the only person in existence who found a way to free me, and he hates me again."

Rei hands rested still on her leg, a soft warm comfort in the dead cold of her home. She could hear her whisper to her, a promise that sparked a small candle flame in the black endless tunnel ahead of her.

"I'll do my best to find him, Nui. I promise to bring your humanity back home."

Rei insisted that Nui get some sleep, dark circles already becoming evident under her eyes. Nui was exhausted and so tied down by her fraying mind and emotions she obliged, stripped of her oil-covered clothes, and fell asleep quickly as she hit the pillows.

Nui found some sleep, but it brought very little recovery. She woke up still with depression clinging to her, but she had more energy to work with this time around. Less than an hour of sleep brought her several ideas and thoughts. She needed to get out of this slump. Gamagoori was gone, his freedom granted, out of her life. She could carry on herself, learn through trial and error. She could fight Ragyo herself, she could defeat her crushing oppression from the inside

out. She could do anything if she pointed her emotions, bad and good, at one goal.

Before she could, she had to let go. She had to accept the facts that he was destined for life with his friends and family, while she was destined to death along with Ragyo's plans. He needed his people more than he needed her. She brought hell and high water upon him, and put him in direct fire of Ragyo. She deserved his hatred, she deserved everything that came to her.

She would rather see him in Satsuki's safety then in her arms. He deserved so much better.

She put on a fresh, clean dress, tied up her boot laces and adjusted her twin drill pigtails until they were perfect along the sides of her head. No bow, no added color, no decoration. Simply her in her normal dress like any other day. She twirled a free lock of her hair absently as she turned to look in the mirror on the far wall.

Her mind played games with her, conjuring up Gamagoori in her mirror before her, brushing back her hair, whispering how she was safe. How she was not a monster, but a human like him. How her emotions were not wrong or horrible, but true to what her heart told her. She could feel his breath on her neck, his kind, soft words echoing in her ears, his touch calming her nerves at each small stroke on her shoulder and through her hair. His presence warmed her, a smile nearly curling her lips as his right hand trailed down her arm, fingers parting her clenched hand, finger intertwining.

His words started to fix her broken heart, warmth returning to her everywhere they touched. His body pressed closer to her, his words echoing as they spelled out what she was, the human girl brought back to life with more options than ever before. She was not the killing thing once before. Her actions would be forgiven, and she could start over with him. She could learn with him at his side, and finally be free of Ragyo's cruel hand.

"I want to believe you, Ira." she told him, raising one hand to touch his face, hitting nothing but empty air. "But without my anchor, I feel so lost."

A hallucination, a dream. It was fake. Cold and ice replaced the warmth of where his 'touch' had been, shivers running up and down her spine for a minute of freezing clarity to her situation. The image of Gamagoori faded away, leaving her with tear trails down her cheeks and her returning loneliness.

She wished she could go back to such comfort, but now all she had to look forward to was the impending horrors her creator would bring upon her feeble world. She needed to breathe one more time before she had to face the truth, and face her uncertain future down the dark tunnel ahead of her.

She hadn't been outside of the Academy in a long time, and the crumbling and dilapidated buildings were unfamiliar and alien to her. She took her time walking through the hallways of the Academy, peering out the windows, and walking through the dirt-covered courtyard, Life Fibers and COVER suits circling around above her like buzzards and flies, circling for their meal of rotten flesh. She looked up as she walked through the open gate of the Academy, and then down to the sprawling landscape of slum and city buildings, the large staircase separating the sections of the town, from the rich to the slums of the poor.

She walked down the path of the stairs, watching buildings of shining white and grey pass by, telecom towers in perfect conditions passing by her, the buzz of Life Fiber-laced wires humming around her. Nothing stirred or moved as she walked down the mute path through the city, catching sight of several abandoned, boarded-up hide outs of students who thought they could hide from Ragyo's all-seeing force. She had watched many of the raids into their hideouts, and was committed to seeing off several executions and COVER conversions, but now wanted nothing more than to forget those memories. The stairs ended, opening to several asphalt or dirt walkways, splitting into roads or alleys in the upper slums. More

houses boarded up, missing, or damaged in this area showed up around her, no doubt those who had very little protecting what they had left.

Heavy air hung on and around her, heavy as her emotional burdens, as she walked through the slums. Mixed emotions boiled up from her gut. She knew many of the students were left to live here, left with No-Star uniforms and constant fighting and inter-community wars and fights, looters, homeless families, lack of power, water, food, and roofs.

Is this what that annoying pest-

No. No, her name is Mako Mankanshoku. She wasn't an annoying pest. She was a girl defending her lights in life. She was like her, fighting and competing with everyone to keep her friends and family close and healthy. She was a powerful force, and had the strength and willpower to fight what came at her.

She lived in the slums. She had a hard upbringing, but grew around it, and learned to adapt and thrive off of it. Become the bright fighter she was today by living in the dirt and poor, and learning from it.

She continued through the buildings, taking in what used to be thriving with people and students. So many empty buildings and lingering emotions. Nui brushed at the tears suddenly burning her eyes. She could see Gamagoori keeping an eye on Mankanshoku, ensuring that she made it home safe. She could see it in front of her, in uniform and all, trailing behind Mako as she skipped down the trash-covered alleyways toward home, Ryuuko close at hand beside her, eyeing the large man with some anger as Nui suspected was because of earlier tensions between the groups.

She stopped for a moment, the image fading away. It had her thinking. Maybe... just maybe... could he still be here? Could there be one last chance that he stayed here?

One place he could go... Mankanshoku's house? Where the hell could it be in the sea of tin and asphalt houses?

She held on to her hope, but it started to dwindle as she moved through more of the slums, winding through alleys and peeking into buildings and dead ends, finding no sign of life or people anywhere. Cold air fell around her, night slowly approaching and the twelfth hour falling since Gamagoori took his freedom and ran. She had some heat stored from her Life Fibers, but with her heart still struggling to accept her loss, the cold hit her harder than before. She ran her hands over her bare arms hoping to find warmth in the cold air. She could just start to see her breath as she took several experimental breathes, watching night start to fall as her breath became more visible in the cold air.

She never had the pleasure to enjoy cold nights outside. She never saw snow, or did what humans did when it was cold. She never felt cold up until today, and she honestly wished she was warmer.

She shivered, her internal Life Fibers unable to generate her heat for her. She looked around the scenery, looking around as the sun started to fall on the horizon. She looked over the roofs of the slums, and saw no rise of smoke, no laughter, just dead silence of a town taken by the Life Fibers. She continued to look around as she walked down through the town, until something caught her eye, a flash of color in the dark din of the town.

A flash of blond. A familiar head of hair on top of the a building.

She didn't realize she started to walk faster, the buildings moving quickly in a blur as she caught sight of it again, this time she saw a body to match, brown against the grey of the roof it sat on. Solid muscle and body against a mismatched grey background.

She was running now, her heart beginning to beat painfully, trying to start-up again after so long without working.

"Gamagoori?"

Her feet moved as quickly as they could, barreling through glass and trash down the alleyway as she ran for the figure. She slipped once, her knees grinding against the rough ground. She brushed the trash away and ran despite her injuries, trying to see him again. Just over the top of a destroyed home, she saw him, sitting on top of a small tin-roofed house. He was looking off to the sunset, not braced for the cold around him.

She slipped as she found the corner toward him, creating more road rash on her legs. She was healing slower than usual for her, blood dripping down her legs as the Life Fibers in her didn't seem to work all too well. She looked up from her legs to him, finally feeling her heart in her chest again. She smiled and stood on her feet despite the pain in her legs. She took a moment to just look at him, to make sure that he was here.

He was there. Gamagoori was right there, in reach again.

"Gamagoori?!"

She walked calmly through the small alleyway toward him, and felt her body get warmer as he turned to her. She could feel her heart finally start beating in her chest, the cracks starting to heal as his grey eyes, no longer angry at her, look at her in surprise and mild amazement.

She felt her humanity start to return again.

She stopped respectfully several feet back from the house, panting softly and trying to catch her breath. She brushed her messy hair out of her face, wiping sweat away as she did. She brushed her tears away and looked at Gamagoori, a smile breaking through her face.

He hadn't moved too much after seeing her, but his surprise still showed in his eyes. She was just glad that he hadn't left Honnou Town and gone far away. He moved so he could face her, his eyes a mix of emotions she couldn't pinpoint exactly, however no anger showed, and she took a breath of relief.

"I thought you had left." she told him, her voice choked with emotion, "I would have thought you would have gotten out-of-town."

He took a moment to breathe, rubbing an arm as the wind whipped around him. He still was without a shirt, scars bright against his skin, but it seemed that the cold didn't bother him much.

"I couldn't let my rage lead me somewhere I didn't want to go. I had to calm myself before making my decision."

Nui stepped up a little closer, her emotions starting to burn inside her. She choked for a moment, but found her voice, however weak it was. "So... you never meant to hit me?"

"No." he didn't hesitate to answer, jumping off of the building gently, out of the cold wind. "No, I didn't. I did not know how to react after you took her Mind Stitching out, and all I could feel was rage, pure rage, at the horrors I went through. I couldn't stop myself before I woke up from that rage in the Two-Star homes, and only the memory of hurting you. I hope I can be forgiven for that mistake."

He leaned away from the small house, a dead neon sign hanging high above it. He looked calm, but gave off confused waves of emotions she couldn't pull apart. She didn't pay attention to it, simply reveling in the revelation that he did not want to hurt her, or wanted to hate her.

"Of course you're forgiven. I thought you hated me again." Nui admitted mournfully, "That what had developed... was gone. The sincerity, everything, was simply a construct brought down."

"Nui... I did, long before this. I wanted nothing more than to hurt you for what you had done, but this time under you, alongside you, has changed that. It's changed everything I thought and knew about you, and how I felt toward you. I had not known how dark a hole Ragyo had dug for you, and how hard she tried to kill what humanity was in you so early in your life. I did not know anything kind rested inside you."

"I didn't expect to connect to you, to pull you out of the dark and return to humanity. I never thought I would see you smile without malicious intent, or show such vibrant and bright emotions. I never knew I would see you worried for me, to see me as an important person in your life. I never thought I would feel the same."

Nui went numb as he walked up to her, grabbing her forearm gently. Warmth spread from the physical contact, her mind working again as his grey eyes locked with her bright blue, the air around them charging with something unexplained, but Nui loved its feeling.

"You have changed, and you have changed how I see you, Nui. I stayed because I still have to show you how free it is, how hard it is, and how amazing it is to be human. I still have an unexplained draw toward you, Nui, and I intend to stay while you still need me."

Nui felt her heart finally beat normally, the pain from its breaking fading away as what she thought was a mirage finally became reality. She took her other hand and touched his face, finally letting out a cry as her hand touched solid skin. It wasn't a fake image in her mirror, or a vision, but the real Gamagoori standing before her, telling her he was staying. She jumped into his chest, laughing and crying as he caught her, hugging her close and telling it was alright, that he was here for her.

"S-so... so you'll stay with me, you'll be with me for a little longer?" she asked when she was on her feet again, "I won't have to let go again?"

He brushed her hair back again, such a calming motion for her, and nodded. "I'll stay. I'll stay until I'm no longer needed. I am your anchor, and your light in this dark life you're escaping, and am willing to stand by you and help and defend you. Is... that alright with you?"

"T-thank you, thank you. You gave me my life back, and gave me my humanity. My beacon, my humanity in solid form, my light at the end of the tunnel. I'd love to have you stay with me."

She cuddled up to him, pressing her cold cheeks into his chest. His arms wove around her again, a hand running through one of her pigtails as she cried into his chest, forgetting about the cold night surrounding them, and the ominous rattling of the buildings.

"I feel warm again."

Gamagoori smiled as Nui lifted her face away from him, her face bright red from her crying, but nonetheless looking flawless and in awe of him. He brushed away her tears, his fingers catching hold of her patch over her long-lost left eye. He carefully peeled it away, revealing the criss-crossing scars that now replaced the sealed socket. Small tears leaked through her scars, and he carefully brushed them away, running his thumb gently over them.

"I have something to ask of you, Nui. Something I have mulled over for quite some time."

She blinked back the rest of her tears, looking quickly to her patch in his hands, feeling free of the weight that had weighed her down earlier. She stepped back a bit, smiling as she adjusted herself, picking herself up enough to speak.

"What is it?"

He extended out a hand, a genuine smile crossing his lips. Despite the cold and wind and desolation, the area lit up in light and warmth, and made his proposal even more breathtaking.

"Come with me. Run away from his vile prison you've too long called a home. Will you let me take you away from this darkness, Nui?"

She was not prepared for what he said, and found herself breathless and stunned. She couldn't bring words to her lips, or a gasp from her lungs.

Her only thought in mind was this: Did she want to run away from the darkness that threatened to swallow her whole?

She knew her answer, immediately scolding herself for doubting a different answer. She smiled, her eyes brightening as she took his hand, Gamagoori pulling her closer. Her lungs found air, and she gladly looked him in the eyes, no doubt her happiness and relief coming through.

"Take me far away from here."

Running Toward The Escape

They would only have to return to the Academy to collect some supplies and things, and then they could live it in the dust. Nui could finally be free of her poisonous home life with her 'mother'. Hand in hand, consciousness cleared and pointed directly to where they needed, they took the long hike back up to the Academy. She didn't argue against the handing-holding idea, honestly it had her excited and partly nervous nerves, but it had her thoughts running on a new wheel.

Why would Gamagoori offer such a thing? She knew not to worry about it, but it had her intrigued. She squeezed his hand, hoping for a reaction, and after a soft smile from him, and her perfectly executed quizzical look, she got her answer.

"I figured more... erm physical contact would keep you warm, as you said earlier so..."

Nui smiled warmly, adjusting her hand so his hand entirely enveloped it. "Thank you, Gamagoori. Though if it doesn't feel comfortable it's fine--"

Nui yelped, her words collapsing under the weight of her sudden falling. Gamagoori caught her before she faceplanted into the ground, quickly identifying what caused her fall: her right ankle had twisted, causing her to lose balance and fall under the uselessness of her twisted around foot. From the pain she was trying to mask on her face, she wouldn't be able to walk on it again until they fixed it.

"Stupid foot..." Nui grumbled before hissing as she moved it, putting her injured foot in a spot where it didn't look like her foot was snapped all the way around, facing the opposite way, "How did that even do that?"

"It just does, Nui. It's obvious you won't be able to bear weight on it. I know you're in pain."

Nui hid another flash of pain as she tried to move the foot, her ankle obviously in no position to move. "N-no, I can walk. I've been through worse. I'm okay."

"You're not, and we both know it." Gamagoori insisted. Nui looked down at the arm around her chest, keeping her on her knees and off the ground. She glanced back at her ankle, tiny lightning strikes of pain running through her leg as her ankle twitched.

She sighed and grabbed hold of Gamagoori as he carefully lifted her off the ground, relocating her on top of a dead ac unit. She adjusted her spot a bit, still hissing as her ankle moved. She had felt pain greater than this, but something in her body made this pain hard to hide. Gamagoori knelt beside her, gently grabbing her leg and pulling at her boot laces.

"Is it alright if I look at it?"

Nui nodded softly, closing her eyes for a moment and taking a breath. She wasn't used to feeling pain from every little twitch, and she hoped that getting her boot off would help a bit.

With careful consideration to her, he undid the laces on her boots with nimble fingers, despite his size, and waited for her approval before he started to slide her boot off, trying his best to cause the least amount of pain. Nui held her breath, forcing herself to stop reacting to the small yet vicious snaps of pain from her ankle as her boot slid off, her ankle showing signs of swelling and slight color change.

His hands enclosed around her leg, above her injured ankle, moving her leg as he looked at it. Nui focused in on the warmth enveloping her leg, unable to stop the shiver going up her spine as much-needed warmth replaced her lonely coldness.

'His hands still feel like the sun. How can it still feel like I'm being bathed in heat under his touch?' Nui's thoughts were similar to this, all focused in on his hands simply radiating heat that flooded into her skin like a drug to save her life, *'Was it always so cold without him?'*

"It doesn't look broken, but the swelling does tell me you've done damage to it. How did you do this just from tripping?"

Nui shook out of her thoughts, focusing back on his words and away from the warmth still coming off of the contact they made. She couldn't shake her happiness at the unexpected amount of warmth, however.

"My ankle twisted hard when I tripped. I think it was just a poor step, and I did this to myself." Nui explained, looking down at her ankle, wanting to twist it to see what it looked like from all sides, but the pain she was feeling now just by unconsciously twitching it made her rethink her decision. "Will I be able to walk on it?"

"If you want to make it worse. I'm sorry about the bluntness, but you could hurt yourself more if you walk on it, and if we're running away, I don't want your injury getting you captured under Ragyo again."

Nui's heart pounded in her rib cage, still trying to get used to the real Gamagoori's worry for her health and security. She smiled and reached out to him, her hands landing on top of his head, drawing his gaze with a curious expression.

"It's still very weird to hear you so worried for me, after returning to yourself." Nui confessed, "I still can't shake the feeling that this isn't what you really think."

Gamagoori's eyes betrayed his disbelief at her words. Her smile weakened, her hands sliding off of his head as sorrow settled crudely in her stomach. She knew it was a silly and pointless feeling but it could not be shaken. His hands, still warm like the sun beating down on her skin, grabbed her falling hands. She looked at him with confliction as he gently squeezed both, and gently moved the fingers

on her right hand until his fingers were nestled between them, his eyes bright grey, showing his calm, respect, and passion.

"As I told you, Nui, what I've done for you, what you did for yourself, by accepting humanity again has changed what I feel a great deal," he started, closing his eyes for a moment before opening them to her, an emotion swimming in his grey eyes unknown to Nui, "And I can't completely understand what I feel right now, but I can easily wash away any fear and doubt you have about me. I don't hate you, or purposely stay to hurt you or bring you to Lady Satsuki and the others to have you hurt. I find myself truly worried about you.

"I worry about your health and emotions, and your mind very much. You've been through hell, and even farther under Ragyo's deceitful, disgusting hands. You've already struggled with your childhood memories, and still do to this moment. You don't know how to deal with them, or how to control or understand many emotions. I can even see now that I'm showing you something you don't understand."

Nui slowly nodded. "Something in your eyes. It's something... an emotion I don't know."

Gamagoori sighed, a knowing smile on his lips. "I don't know how, but that emotion may be love, Nui."

"Love?"

He nodded, his hands moving again so that both his hands were entangled in hers. "You've lived in a world of hate, and fear, and sorrow. You were told to become emotionless, and had so many negative emotions follow in your wake. Anger, hatred, sorrow, fear, deceit, I could list so many more. Those became normal for you, and you never knew any other reactions or emotions.

"And now, thanks to your own discovery, and my help, those emotions are being replaced with new ones, much better, brighter

ones. Happiness, relief, wonder, passion, relaxation, friendship, peace, but a great deal more love."

Nui looked down at their hands, counting each finger and with each number her heart pounded harder. Love... was that what she felt right now? The increased heart-rate, the impossible heat she felt from his touch, and the fact that she didn't want to see him leave her? Was that love, attachment? She didn't have a word to what she felt, but it was a powerful positive emotion.

"What does it feel like, love?" Nui asked, honestly never knowing what it felt like to feel it. She had a loveless childhood, and life, "Does everyone feel it differently?"

Gamagoori took his left hand and moved so he could brush her hair back from her face, fingers gently gracing over her cheek. "It can feel very different to everyone. There is love from your family, which is warming and touching. It's the first type of love you feel. Then there's platonic love, friendship love, attachment, even obsession. There are many types of love, and they cover the entire scale of emotions. Many people feel romantic love for someone they care for or feel close to, and some don't feel romantic love at all. Personally, up until now, I had never felt romantic love for another person."

Nui caught on to what he said, that up to now he never felt romantic love. She was most certain what she felt, this summer warmth she felt when with him, had to be that.

"What do you feel with me now?"

"To be honest, I do not know, but from what you saw in me... it has to be love, but I don't completely understand what it is or how it came to happen." Gamagoori confessed, setting his left hand against her cheek, "But perhaps you can help me figure this out."

Nui wanted to react immediately, say yes and show him what she felt for him, and maybe lead him but something still felt off. She had

watched Gamagoori earlier. He wasn't this... open and everything, so willing to offer information like this so easily.

"... I still feel like you're not being yourself..." she admitted softly, reaching up for the hand on her cheek, "That you are forcing yourself to say all of this."

He closed his eyes. "I understand. I realize that I sound very far off from what I used to be, but did you forget? You aren't the only person who has changed. When I was still under Mind Stitching, both yours and Ragyo's, I could act, I could put forth what I felt. I could put my real reactions into what my imprisoned persona did. I couldn't believe that I had fueled the fire that changed you, and it showed me that even the most dark-filled and terrified people can be freed from their prisons, and find light again. I think that is how I developed what I feel now, because you showed yourself to me, you proved your strength and power and personality through your rediscovery of your humanity. You showed me what you truly were, and it amazed me.

"And that has made me rethink a lot about myself, and how I could learn from it myself."

She forgot about her twisted ankle, and the fear that accompanied her memories plaguing her dreams. She forgot her emotional struggles, and her fear of what was to come after them once they ran. She forgot her issues, and saw only him. Her anchor, her humanity, her human. The one person willing to see her as human, as someone, and he was amazed by her transformation.

He was there, always, behind the persona the Life Fibers created, influencing his actions. He was truly there for her. He felt this way for so long.

She hadn't realized she started crying, but she felt his thumb run under her right eye, gently brushing them away, then reach under her scarred left eye, brushing the small tears dripping from her sealed-off socket.

"Do you believe me now?"

Nui nodded, brushing her tears away on her own. "Yes..."

"I'm glad, then."

She smiled and opened her eyes again as he moved closer to her, resting his forehead on hers for a moment until she felt her calm settle. He settled back beside her, his hands grabbing her right leg from the back, slowly lifting it up.

He sighed. "We still need to get this looked at better and that means getting up to the Academy."

"I can't walk on it. How are we-"

"Do you trust me, Nui?" he cut her off rudely, but the question got her attention. He was planning something. She nodded, admittedly a little worried about what he had planned. He got up, went to her side, and wrapped an arm around her waist.

"Grab on to me. I know how to get us there."

With her trust resting on him, she grabbed on, wrapping her arms around his neck as he lifted her up, into the air for the briefest moment until she was rested comfortably in the crook on an arm, his hand rested underneath her knees to keep her there. Her legs dangled from their place, but for the moment her ankle did not hurt. He knelt quickly without moving or jostling her much, grabbing her discarded boot, keeping hold of it in his free hand.

"Is this alright?" he asked cautiously, moving his left arm a little. She settled easily into his arm and quickly found herself perfectly balanced. She let go of his neck and instead rested her hand on his shoulder, and the other wrapped under his chin so she could nudge his face closer, leaving the quickest of kisses on his cheek.

"It's perfect! My ankle doesn't even hurt like this. Thank you."

He automatically blushed under her affection and praise, moving her arm so he could look where he was going, and started his careful ascend up through the slums streets toward the gleaming Academy above them, the white castle against its stormy background. They went into comfortable silence, Gamagoori focusing on carrying her and his careful footing. She had her thoughts trained on the warmth finally filling her once cold shell. She sighed under her breath as that warmth reached her heart, the cracks still remaining starting to heal. She rested herself against his shoulder, her head resting in perfectly on his shoulder.

"Thank you for not abandoning me..." she murmured, sleep grabbing for her as her eyes drooped, "Thank you... sleepy..."

She closed her eyes and focused in on that familiar and lovely warmth, and the soft rocking and movement of his shoulder. She needed to find some sleep if she wanted to be ready to run. She before she slipped under the unconscious spell her body weaved for her, she heard his silent, yet emotion-choked response.

"I couldn't abandon someone who needed me so much. I would never hurt you like that. I swear on it."

Nui woke up with a blurry image of Hououmaru flirting around her like a nervous bird, her voice frantic for one so calm and collected.

"It's obvious what the issue is now. We need to re-activate her Life Fibers. That's why she's healing like a normal human. That switch into humanity has shut them down only to where she can use them for issues like healing minor injuries!"

"And how is this not a minor injury?"

"I don't know why! I've lived with Life Fibers all my life, not within me but you still understand my point, and this is entirely new to me."

"If we're supposed to put miles between us and Ragyo, we need to leave today. If she can't walk, we're done for!"

"And I understand, I'm telling you I can't control her Life Fibers and how they work. She has to do that on her own and figure it out on her own."

"You realize that if we re-activate them, she could return under Ragyo. There has to be some other way we can!"

"What I used on you before won't work on her. We've tried that before, and because she's part Life Fiber, part human, Life Fiber-assisted healing through external, weakened bundles won't do anything to her. So she has to do it herself!"

Nui sat up with her left hand rubbing at her eye, drawing Gamagoori and Hououmaru from their heated discussion. None of what they had said made much sense to her, but it drew her from her usual wake up routine.

"What's going on?"

She looked around for a moment, catching their eyes before looking down at her bound ankle. She remembered she had fallen asleep, but did not realize she fell asleep long enough to reach the Academy and receive medical help for her ankle, only to find that it still hurt. Was that why they were talking about her?

Gamagoori took the first turn to explain. "You're not healing because you're Life Fibers have shut down with your return to humanity, and if you want to walk on that ankle, you need to figure out how to activate them again to heal."

"W-what?! How can a simple thing like humanity stop Life Fibers like that?" Nui exclaimed, angered suddenly by a long-embedded impulse. She covered her mouth before she could stop herself, confusion and disappointment replacing the flash anger. Gamagoori took to his job of support, immediately reassuring her that what she

had done was alright. Hououmaru stepped up to explain better as Gamagoori took his honorary spot beside Nui.

"This happened before your Life Fibers were originally activated when you were young. Humanity holds a lot of strengths that Life Fibers can't combat, so they either hibernate, or shut down, and humanity overpowers it. It's the same in you as in Ryuuko, it works the same. The moment you started accepting humanity back into your life, and the moment you truly embraced it, your Life Fibers were shutting down. You lost all benefits of them besides emergency use of them when you're in danger."

Nui took a moment to absorb the information. "So now that I accept my human part... my Life Fibers won't work like they would when I let them rule? I can't heal instantly?"

"It's why you're more susceptible to pain and injury now as well," Gamagoori added, "Why you reacted like you did when you twisted it."

"I can't heal quick... so what now?" Nui was as confused on what to do now as they were. She wasn't used to having her Life Fibers take the back seat. She was used to healing instantly, she was used to the normalcy of being nearly sliced to pieces and being sewn together again in seconds.

"As I pointed out to Gamagoori earlier, it's your body. You have to figure out how to simply draw on your Life Fibers for healing now. You have to experiment until something works."

Gamagoori's expression grew dark. "Or until she falls under Ragyo's thumb again, and we lose her."

"That won't happen. Ragyo does not control all Life Fibers. She consorts with the Original Life Fiber, and protects and builds on it until it's ready to swallow this planet," Hououmaru argued, "It would not be as simple as snapping her fingers and calling upon specific Life Fibers to serve and do her bidding."

"And yet she can command entire legions of COVERS without a raise of her voice?!"

Nui covered her ears, tired of their bickering even at the start. "Stop it! I can't concentrate if you guys are arguing!"

Their conversation ceased at Nui's exclamation, their apologies spoken softly as she relaxed again, closing her eyes and trying to focus in to herself.

"I want to try something, so be quiet." she told them, and dove into herself, searching through her body for what she needed. Her skin and muscle hummed with new-found heat and warmth. Her body was entirely new to her now. Her body didn't hum loudly with the workings of her Life Fibers, and her heart did not have two different sounds. It beat like a human heart. She could tell it didn't glow with Life Fibers anymore.

She let her body activate Life Fibers around her legs, the tight band of them woven into her muscles glowing in her mind. From the reaction outside of her mind, it must have glowed for them as well. She felt immediate cold and warmth battle around her ankle as her Life Fibers realized her body was injured, and went to work curing her ailment.

"It's working." Hououmaru whispered, watching Nui's skin glitter like precious gems as her Life Fibers worked at her ankle and leg, "Nui, it's working, you're fixing yourself!"

Nui would have responded, but it took all her willpower to keep focus on her Life Fibers, to let them work. She would have to work on conditioning this new skill so she could use it easily if she found herself in battle. Her ankle gave a pop as it finally fixed, and she immediately shut off the power to the Life Fibers like a fire hose. When she opened her eyes, the dizzy spell hit her like a bullet, and she swayed into Gamagoori as her vision went fuzzy for a solid minute.

"Nui?!"

"I'm okay, Ira," she reassured him as it passed, sitting up slowly so she didn't cause another dizzy spell, "Dizzy spell. A big one. Now my head just aches a lot."

Hououmaru chuckled softly. "You're brilliant. You figured out at least how to work your Life Fibers again, but it drains you as well. Now can you walk on it?"

Gamagoori stood up and offered his help like a gentleman, Nui taking his hand and standing on her other foot before putting weight on her newly healed ankle, finding no issue. She proceeded to not just walk, but run and spin on it to show she could work perfectly on it again.

"It works like brand new," Nui noted, sighing in relief, "So... now do we pack and run?"

Gamagoori nodded, looking to Hououmaru and getting her nod of approval. "Now we pack and escape from this hell."

"Are you sure Ragyo won't come for me immediately?"

Hououmaru brushed her worry. "She will find out you left with him, and connect the dots herself. If I know Lady Ragyo, she will hold back on an impulse like retrieving you. Your work on Shinra-Kouketsu will be her main focus, as all there is left is the final steps. Don't worry, Lady Nui. You will be fine with him and the others."

Nui brushed away her leaking tears. "Rei... you were always there, weren't you?"

The secretary sighed softly, a smile stretching her lips up. "When I could. When my actions would be seen as customary for my job or could be forgiven. I wanted you to be happy as I have made Lady Ragyo happy."

Nui smiled wide, and jumped onto Hououmaru in an attempt for a hug, which luckily she was ready for. Nui was glad that at least she could be free with peace in mind for a while.

"When you come back to kill us, and you will," Hououmaru started to say, her voice softening as she stepped out of the hug, "Do not hold back. Keep your mind where it should be, and do not let your heart sway your hand."

"I won't." Nui told her without hesitation, "because I know I will come back for Ragyo's head. I won't let her live for what she's done to me and others."

Hououmaru stepped back from Nui with a gentle smile, handing her the grey bag she packed. Nui gladly slung the bag over her shoulder and turned to Gamagoori who walked in with the small bag he had. Hououmaru dug something out of her pockets and tossed it to him with a call of his name. He caught the object and looked down at the shining pair of keys in his hand.

"Your car is sitting in the garage. Use it to get out of here."

Gamagoori's eyes lit up, happiness evident everywhere he looked. "This means a great deal to me. Thank you, Rei, for keeping it safe. Do you have everything, Nui?"

Nui realized she had almost forgotten one very important item. She rushed out of the room and through the hall to her room, opening the door calmly and then typing in another code, a hidden panel opening to reveal a velvet-lined case.

Inside was her purple Scissor Sword.

She opened the glass gently, taking the handle of her stolen piece of Dr. Matoi's weapon, stalling as she watched the paint on several parts of it chip away, red bleeding out from the oppressive purple color she made it be. She ran her free hand over it, watching small

red spots appearing on the sword from out under the purple cover she had outfitted over it.

Even the weapon she wielded could feel her change.

She opened the department below it, grabbed her metal carrying case, stored her Scissor Sword inside, and went back to their meet up room, Gamagoori eyeing her case until he figured out what the cargo was. Nui gave no more hug to Hououmaru before taking Gamagoori's hand and entering the elevator, seeing Hououmaru smile as the doors closed, and send them down to the largely unused parking garage below the Academy.

Nui watched the lights as they lit up on each floor. "Hey, Ira?"

"Hm?"

"What will Lady Satsuki and the others think about me? Will you make sure they don't hurt me?"

Gamagoori smiled mournfully. She knew he didn't like that she thought like that, but she was honestly afraid that Nudist Beach and everyone there would try to hurt or kill her. She felt his reassuring squeeze of her hand before she looked up as he let his lips whisper a kiss on her forehead.

"Don't worry about them. I'll keep them at bay if they so much as try to act on their hatred."

Nui smiled, blush heating her cheeks as his lips lingered on her forehead for longer then expected. He drew away when the doors opened, evading quickly despite his pink cheeks betraying his fluster about the extended tender moment they shared. She followed behind him toward the lone car in the lot, the bright pink color and the evident leather seats catching her attention.

"We're going to escape in this? Are you sure?"

"It's faster than walking, and... I don't want to leave a gracious gift like this from my family behind." Gamagoori smiled as he ran a hand over the hood, looking over the still bright driver's license on the hood.

Nui understood easily. She walked up to the car and helped Gamagoori load their things into the trunk, securing down her Scissor Sword to the bottom. With the trunk slammed shut, Nui climbed into the passenger seat and relaxed into the leather seat, ready to leave, as Gamagoori climbed in.

"Ready?"

"Absolutely."

Gamagoori took out his keys, and started the car up, the engine roaring to life with a heavy growl. With a quick flip of his headlights, and a quick shout back to Hououmaru, he pulled out of the parking garage, and drove quickly down the winding highway through the Academy, the school fortress climbing above them as they went down toward the slums and the bay.

Nui would never look back until they hit Honnou Town, almost at the bay. The long winding bridge to take them across was just ahead, and once on that, they were free. She grabbed her eyepatch, which she had put back on, ripped it off, stood in her seat braced on the headrest, and tossed the purple patch away, floating the breeze before disappearing. Gamagoori turned toward her with a congratulatory smile, happy to see her finally let it all go.

She would never miss it again, and settled back into the car with the greatest relief filling her.

She was finally free of her abusive mother, and the incestuous, bloody kingdom she forged.

Gas for their Fire

Freedom.

She never imagined herself free. It was such a relief to finally experience freedom for herself, simply feeling the weightlessness she felt as she and Gamagoori drove down the long stretch of highway, the Academy getting smaller and smaller behind them. The storm brewed above them, the cold still heavy in the air, the darkening clouds threatening a storm. Sundown faded into twilight as the storm continued to grow above them, Gamagoori taking notice and switching on the headlights. She watched the clouds above as Gamagoori drove, hearing the muffled rumble of thunder above them. With no roof on the car, the impending rain would ruin the car and them.

"We need to find someplace to stop, Ira. It's going to rain."

Gamagoori spared a glance up to the dark grey and black sky, and nodded in agreement. "I can search for the hood when we find a place across the highway."

Nui spent her time watching the bay as they continued down the highway in silence, a comfortable lack of noise but nonetheless a little anxiousness fluttered between them, seeing if anything sailed on the horizon, finding nothing but open ocean growing wild with the storm's approach. Seagulls screeched above them, but outside of their shrill noise, nothing wild stirred. Waves slammed dangerously against the highway as they neared the end of the long stretch over open ocean, and Nui was partly glad they made it before waves slammed into the road, and possibly them.

The land was all trees and untouched nature, not a man-made structure in sight besides ones overgrown in vegetation along the tree line. The thunder grew louder above them, wind blowing the trees around them, wildlife hidden inside coming alive with a

cacophony of sound and calls. The rain started quicker than expected, leading them to quickly evade under a vine-covered gas station, luckily with its large cover still intact. The station was dry of fuel, but it provided shelter under the heavy rain starting to fall. With temporary shelter found, the car went off to save gas, and Gamagoori took to searching, coming up with nothing.

"We're stuck here until the rain stops."

Nui blew a raspberry as she leaned against the hood of the car, not amused with the news of their situation. Stuck underneath a gas station hangover, with nothing to help with the cold. She thought she was cold, with her thin pink dress and exposed shoulders and legs, but all Gamagoori had on him was a thin t-shirt and white pants torn through in several places. He had to be cold, or at least willing to admit the cold bothered him a bit. She was surprised he didn't have something better to wear.

"Aren't you cold, Ira?"

He looked at her with a masked expression. "Not really, I've dealt with worse so it doesn't bother me."

"Your goosebumps say otherwise." Nui teased, walking up to him to poke the bumpy raised skin. No matter what he said, his body told him he was cold. He scowled at her for a moment before pushing her hand away with a hint of a smile.

"I'll be fine, Nui. Cold weather never bothered me."

Nui frowned. "Even with the state of your pants, which you've worn since... since I... I..."

He was there in an instant, leading her gently to the back of his car a few feet away, leaning her against it. His forehead rested on hers, his left hand holding her right, the other running over her left shoulder, the warmth still cascading from his touch soothing her sudden panic. Even her forehead could feel the summer sun heat

coming from his skin, the warmth and light soaking into her as her darkness and fear retreated from their insidious deeds, meeting their end as her humanity rekindled.

"I just don't want you to neglect yourself while trying to save me. You need to keep your warmth. You need to stay warm." Nui murmured, "So please... don't freeze."

Gamagoori's smile was the first thing she saw when she opened her eye again. "I brought something to wear. Care to help scout through the gas station with me?"

"Sure."

The small convenience store connected to the station was abandoned as indicated from the plant life clinging to the outside wall and flickering lights inside. The black and white floor tiles cracked where vines dug into the earth, long-rotten snack and sugar foods stuck to the cracks of the linoleum floors. Water leaked from small holes in the roof thanks to the storm outside, making puddles along the ground. Looted glass containers, doors still intact, swayed ominously behind the heavy counter, cash register thrown to one side, empty and covered in dust. Stands once full of magazines and articles, even manga, were empty and left to rust on the ground, old papers rotted away around them. The lights flickered continuously until Gamagoori walked into a back room ahead of Nui, and flipped a switch of sorts, the lights dying for a moment before turning on. Dimmed from their original bright setting, but they stayed on somehow.

"Let there be light." Gamagoori teased as he stepped out, "How this place has power, I will never know."

"Generator not broken in the back?" Nui said with a shrug. She could only guess with him, having no clue either. At least the building was covered from the cold and wind and rain, and held some semblance of warmth.

"Could be. At least it's not a complete disaster, and the office is clean and untouched."

Nui smiled. "So we have a dry place to stay while it rains. Do you think there's still food here?"

"Probably not, though if this place has power, the refrigerators in the back may still work. Before we check, let me change, okay?"

Nui nodded and followed him outside again, poking her head out of the doorway. The rain fell hard and fast outside their overpass, the car fifteen feet from the storefront. They were safe for now, a safe distance for now from Ragyo and the Academy, and they had shelter if they had to stay here for a night. Gamagoori grabbed his bag, dug through it quickly and pulled out a fresh pair of brown pants, which Nui recalled she made before he had freedom to replace the shredded ones he had on, as well as a thick black jacket, which Nui remembered could stretch to anyone's size; her own design and prototype.

She stepped back inside as he walked back in with what he needed, smiling at her before retreating into the office and closing the door.

Nui look at the office for a moment before walking through the dirty room and sitting up on the dust and dirt covered counter, playing with the glass display case beside her absently, the hinges of the door creaking with each small swing of the door.

Time.

She had always had plenty of time, but she never truly had free time, downtime to think and act and relax. She worked until deemed down for today, and then worked on the prisoners in the bottom of the school, sending students into COVERS and killing those too weak or rebellious for their vision.

How much blood had come on to her hands from her blind and horrendous partnership with Ragyo and REVOCS? How many

parents did she cause grief as she disposed of or enslaved their children before their eyes? How many tears were shed and cries for help were made as she broke and killed innocent civilians in her once ongoing campaign to strike fear into the hearts of REVOCS competition?

How much darkness still stained her heart and soul? Would she really be ever free of the pain, misery, disaster, tears and blood she left in her wake for so many years?

She adjusted her place so she could wrap her arms around her legs, curled up on top of the counter like a cat. She let her quickly darkening thoughts drag her down farther into the depths, her head falling on to her knees heavy as stone.

Would she ever be truly free of the plague-like curse of death staked into her soul?

She felt his warmth before she saw his arms wrap around her in a protective mass of muscle. She looked up at him as he pressed her back against him, warmth pouring into her as she relaxed, her legs slowly sliding back over the edge of the counter. He squeezed her gently, a reassuring pressure that he was there for her.

"How did you know?" Nui asked quietly, gently grabbing his arms around her. He sighed against her shoulder, his breath as warm and caressing as his touch.

Gamagoori's voice was low and deep. "I'm finding it easier to sense your distress. You were also shaking, but don't worry about the details. You don't need to worry anymore."

"I do though. All I see are the bodies around me. I'm forever a murderer, a villain. I will never be able to let go of the misery and tears and death I created."

"Why would you torture yourself with the past darkness, Nui?" She could hear his own distress and worry in his voice, but she let her

pointless yet relentless sorrow dig into her deeper.

"Because it haunts me like a shadow!" Nui twisted out of his arms, sending him back a few steps from her as she spun to face him, "It won't go away, it won't leave me alone! Why would you still care about this mess that I've become, damn it!?"

"I care about you because I don't want to have someone I love fall again! I want to help you. I want to be there when this happens, Nui. I've stayed this long so I could help you learn from those mistakes, and become better and greater than what you forced to be."

Nui lowered her head, partly in anger and shame. She hated herself for letting her darkness get the best of her, make herself doubt Gamagoori again. She was angry at the dark part she still possessed that still fought her at every turn, every moment of clarity, to pull her down. She closed her eyes, and tried to calm down. She hated herself.

She hated herself for dragging old memories out from the depths of her conscience.

Gamagoori waited until Nui reached out for him before returning to embracing her, running his hand through her hair, refraining from saying anything until Nui had stopped shaking from the sudden emotional and memory overflow. She still twitched as he spoke to her, reassuring her with gentle words and truths.

Lightning crashed outside of the building, thunder booming like a cannon. Nui flinched, hard, as the sound reverberated in the air around them, a long-lost memory washing to the surface from the depths of her locked childhood.

Nui had been locked in her room for punishment for breaking the syringe full of foul-smelling purple liquid meant to be injected into her veins. She got very little food and human interaction. She had water and the occasional secret soda or two from Rei, which kept her spirits up during the long times of silence. She liked the purple-

haired ebony secretary. She was nice to her when she could hide from her mom.

The storm was loud and scary. She was barely four, and hid under her soft blue blanket when the loud boom burst out loudly in the sky outside. It made her shake sometimes, and it made her run from safety under her bed. She would cover her ears and shiver under her blanket, hoping that mom would come and comfort her, that she would put away the scary silver instruments and tell her its okay.

Rei would come in with Satsuki instead, and help her through the big scary storms. Satsuki would mess her hair as she told her of the story of the angry woman in the sky who made that big sound when her husband disobeyed her, betrayed her and cried at her feet for forgiveness. She would tell her that the angry woman would strike her husband in his heart, and it would result in a flash of light as he was reborn.

Nui liked the story about the angry woman in the clouds. It kept her mind busy as the storm continued. She could imagine the woman as a powerful woman, one with a flowing dress that turned into mist and clouds at her feet. It would grow dark when her husband came to her in tears, falling through her dress as it turned smoky gray, her voice loud and booming and all-powerful as she grew mad at his betrayal. She could see her wield a lightning bolt and see her throw it through him, the light bursting from his chest and engulfing them both until he was gone, and the woman calmed.

She would see the clouds start to return to white when she woke up in Rei's lap, Satsuki undoing the small braids in her hair. She survived another bad storm with her closest friends by her side again. They would leave with kind words as she settled into her bed, only to wake up by the cold touch of her mom, sharp angry words bringing her back to reality, her storm woman fading as the sky turned black as the night at the fall of her mother's hand.

Nui gasped out of the memory, tears falling faster for a moment, as she jumped into Gamagoori's arms, temporarily unable to figure out

where she was and how she got there. Gamagoori's warmth seeped in her as she fought to relax from the turbulent ending to the memory, lying against him as his hands held her close, his voice gentle and calming in her ears. She squeezed what she could grab, a handful of fabric which she assumed was his shirt, and crawled closer, pressing her face into his chest.

"How did I get on the floor?" she asked when she could speak, brushing her tears away with a careful touch. She avoided her left eye for the moment, Gamagoori taking care of it for her.

"I took you into the office. I wanted to get you somewhere better suited than a store counter to talk to you and help you calm down." Gamagoori told her, brushing her hair out-of-the-way of her face. She looked around to confirm his words and sighed when she realized where she was, and memories of their coming here returned. She cuddled up in his lap as another clap of thunder slammed in the air, making her squeak. He looked down curiously at her.

"I wouldn't have thought you were afraid of thunder."

"I'm not, but I used to. Really badly, I hated big storms, and thunder... that's what I saw."

"Another memory?"

Nui nodded, laying her head against his chest. He adjusted his legs and arms so he had her propped her in his arms, but still snugly against him.

"I was always alone when storms like this happened, so I grew fearful of them. At least until Ragyo took my humanity away. I still remember the story Satsuki would tell me when I got scared."

Gamagoori faintly smiled. "You would see Lady Satsuki?"

"I would," Nui replied, sounding a little more excited, and much more calm, "Rei would come in while she could with Satsuki, and they would comfort me until the storm went away. Satsuki had a fun tale she would tell me to help distract me from my fear."

Gamagoori's smile grew. "Do you mind telling me the story?"

"Not at all," Nui chirped, smiling up at him as she adjusted her spot, her legs going numb, "So it goes like this: In the clouds, above the storm, there's an angry woman clothed in mist and white clouds, but it turns grey and dark as her anger grows. She's angry at her husband, who had betrayed her by cheating and weeps at her feet for forgiveness."

"That man must be begging a lot for the amount of rain is falling..." Gamagoori mumbled. Nui chuckled and looked to the small window, seeing the heavy rain.

"He must be right now. So he weeps and begs for forgiveness, but she is so angry her voice is like a cannon and it explodes in the sky like a missile. She would tell him his fate with her thundering voice and raise a bolt of lightning and strike him with it, entrapping them both in bright light until the husband disappeared and was reborn somewhere. She would calm again, her dress going from storm grey to white, and her light would be used to banish any lingering anger for the man who once hurt her."

Nui looked through the glass window, imagining that woman in the clouds. It helped her with the next roll of thunder and strike of lightning, closing her eyes only as exhaustion suddenly caught her in a web. She yawned softly and curled up into Gamagoori again. He couldn't help but chuckle under his breath as Nui yawned a second time, catching his laughter quickly.

"What's so funny?" Her voice had an edge to it, but Gamagoori quickly defused the possible anger she held.

"You forgot about the storm, and that we'll have to stay here the night." He smiled as she turned toward the window, night consuming the sky alongside the dark clouds still pouring rain and growling with thunder. Thunder rumbled darkly above them, followed by the sharp strike of lightning in the distance. Nui did not react in fear to it, but did cuddle in closer to him.

She was cold. Too cold, he wasn't warm enough. He should be like the sun, it should feel warm around him.

She didn't need to look at her arms and legs to see that she had goosebumps covering every inch of exposed skin. Chills ran like children up and down her spine, and her shaking caught Gamagoori's eye quickly. She was surprised to find him peeling the jacket used to keep him warm around her, drawing her surprised gaze up to him. His warm smile and love-filled eyes had her heart skipping for a moment before she realized she was staring rather rudely, and turned her gaze to anywhere but his eyes. He drew her gaze back to him with a quick caress of her chin, and adjusted the coat over her shoulders better.

"Now it's your turn to keep from freezing Nui, because for once you were keeping me warm."

Nui gaped, realizing why his touch and body felt cold under her fingers. As she rested against him while he stretched out, prepared to sleep, she could feel that humanly warmth return under her hands and cheek pressed to his chest. With a calm mind, a content feeling, and the warmth from Gamagoori's body, Nui curled up against him and closed her eyes. Before she found rest in the arms of her savior, she had a passing thought.

'If this heat comes from our humanity... I hope it is never snuffed out.'

Nui woke to the sound of the car engine roaring, and the chirping of birds around her. She blinked away her blurry vision, rubbing her eye

and looking around and finding herself alone, the jacket still over her shoulders to block the cold still lingering in the room. She worried enough for her to get on her feet, adjusting the jacket so it covered her enough to fight the cold. She pushed the office door open and heard the morning calm after their storm, birds louder than before, the roar of Gamagoori's car loud and healthy. She quietly exited the gas station convenience store and smiled when she found Gamagoori sitting on the hood of the car, picking through the contents of a communicator Rei had left him in her car.

"Thanks for the jacket."

Gamagoori looked toward her as she walked up, sliding the jacket off her shoulders and giving it back to him, only to have him gently reject it, throwing it over one of her shoulders again.

"It wasn't mine to begin with, and with your help, I'm much warmer. I should be thanking you much more than you thanking me."

"You freed me from a lifetimes worth of death, torture, and inhumanity. I owe you much more than thank yous." Nui countered, "I owe you much more than words."

Gamagoori looked off into the distance. "You don't owe me anything, Nui, for what I did. I did what anyone would have done in that-

"Not anyone," Nui snapped softly, "No one would have cared about me. I was the monster who took what she wanted, and give no cares to others. I'm an enemy. Only someone willing to see the humanity in anyone would see me, and so far you are the only person I would think could see like that. Your open mind and opening heart saw what had been nearly killed so long ago, and you brought it back."

Nui shuffled the jacket on her shoulders before walking into Gamagoori, wrapping her arms around his back. She felt him tense up, but slowly relax, his arms hovering around her, uncertain of what to do.

"Thanks to you, I feel warm like you. Thanks to your heart, I can finally feel mine."

Gamagoori's heart beat gently in her ear, and she could tell her words touched him again. His arms, gently radiating warmth, wrapped around her and tightened their embrace. Nui smiled gently, hearing his heart beat just a little faster, but she didn't mind the increased sound. She loved that sound.

It meant his humanity still continued to live bright and strong.

Away from the Doghouse

The past. She never liked the past. Her past was hazed in shadows built up over years and years of repression, deletion, force, sexual humiliation and assault, pain and death. Much of her childhood is bathed in blood and darkness, the darkest spots the scariest to remember. For so long, she blindly followed Ragyo's rules, orders, and actions. She accepted the fact that she was human, and accepted that she was not to let humans convince her otherwise.

She was told that her body was not hers to worry about. She would heal no matter what the wound, and her pleasure would be gained through Ragyo's touch. Always, no matter where or when, or how, Ragyo would use her for her own pleasure, caring naught for her own daughter's pleasure and admiration. She could remember every instance of her mother's sexual abuse on her. She could remember every room in took place in, including her own room. Her room, Ragyo's room, Ragyo's office, the bath house, the basement, the Original Life Fiber's secret room. So many places, so many touches and bites, and never was it enough for Ragyo.

She could remember watching Satsuki take the same as she did. She was ordered to hold her down, make her feel like they shared their hearts in this way. She had to convince Satsuki what Ragyo was doing was normal.

She remembered everything. She could remember feeling fear, pain, aggression, hatred, and misery. She could still feel the lingering pleasure she got however much it hurt as Ragyo took ultimate pleasure from her cries, blood, and pain. She could remember it all, and it would not ever leave.

She wanted it to burn up in flames. She didn't want to remember. She didn't want to feel Ragyo's ghostly, cold hands running up her sides, the dry ice touch lingering over every part of her body, grabbing her at every place. She could feel those white hands trap

her in the blackness that came afterward, never leaving her skin, never freeing her. She could still feel her blood-red eyes trace over every inch of her skin, touched and untouched, and make sure none of it was pure ever again.

She wanted to forget it already and stop feeling Ragyo's hands all over her, reminding her that no matter what, she would always be there behind her, haunting her like death.

She opened her eyes and found herself in the backseat of Gamagoori's car, jacket laid over her and hair pulled over her shoulder. The car was stopped, the sounds and smells of the bay heavy around her. She could see the faint glow of his communicator in his hands, his fingers wiping over the screen slowly, precisely.

She slowly sat up, rubbing her eye and making the leather underneath her squeak. He turned to her as she leaned around his shoulder to look at the communicator.

"I was about to wake you up. They'll be here to pick us up in a few minutes." He told her, turning the bright screen off and putting it into his pocket. She sighed, stiffening for a moment as she realized what he said. She could feel her chest start to burn at the impact of his words.

"Do they know I'm with you?" she wanted the truth. She knew no one in their right mind would let her free. His face fell for a moment, hand fishing for the communicator for a moment before putting it on the steering wheel.

"They don't. They're expecting me, alone."

Nui smiled sadly. She knew he kept her presence hidden for a reason, but it did not lessen the burning in her chest. She rested her head on his shoulder as he reached up with his right hand to brush through her hair, caressing her cheek for a moment to reassure her of her importance. Her smile brightened a little as he comforted her,

warmth flowing from his palm into her. She sat up away from him and gripped the jacket as she opened the car door and stepped out, looking out over the bay, the gentle wind tossing her hair gently behind her.

The bay had calmed after the storm blew through, the waves almost clear as the ocean beyond it. Through her weather-worn boots, she could feel the cold sand below her.

On the horizon, she could see the tiniest back dot moving slowly toward them. Although they would be afraid of her, and try to hurt her, she knew that her freedom was only an hour or so away.

About an hour before she could finally truly be free out of Ragyo's grip.

"They're on the horizon. We have about an hour." Nui told him, her voice softer than expected. Gamagoori stepped out of his car, trying to see the black dots on the horizon, but could not in the end. He took her word, and took a seat beside her. Nui did not sit down with him, simply standing in the breeze, and thinking to keep her heart at bay of its eventual cracking.

What would happen when they got here? Would they shoot her, maim her? Make her pay for every wrongdoing she had committed on any students? Would she have to pay with her life?

Would Gamagoori convince them of her changes without getting hurt?

She gently shook her head, throwing away the poisonous thoughts from her head, drawing Gamagoori's attention.

"There's one more thing..."

Gamagoori went to ask what she meant by her statement, but watched in silence as Nui undid her boots and stepped out of them, settled them next to his car and walked to the shoreline of the bay,

letting the gentle waves wash over her delicate, small feet. She smiled as she wiggled her toes into the wet sand, sinking down a few centimeters as the waves ticked up to her ankles, the cold waters sending shivers through her legs and spine. She giggled quietly to herself as she kicked one foot playfully, sending a small spray of water into the bay. Through the partly clear water, she could see curious small fish swim toward her, leaving when her toes wiggled again.

She didn't feel the burdens carried for so long. She felt warm and content with simply playing in the shallows of the bay, enjoying herself and experiencing childish things she had been denied. She kicked higher, the resulting spraying reaching farther. She laughed, kicking gently as the water around her sprayed up like waves.

She stepped in farther, two steps, and knelt, putting her hands into the water, wrist deep. Small fish, curious at the new object, nibbled at her fingertips, causing her to gently squeak. The sensation felt alien to her, but it made her heart swell.

Animals didn't like her. They ran whenever she came around, no warning calls or sounds. They ran when she came into any area, and now they weren't afraid of her anymore.

She wiggled her hands playfully, the fish swimming away for a moment before returning and trying to nibble her fingers again. She did so with glee, her smile widening with each playful turn of the small fish. The waves from the bay came higher, hitting the bottom of her dress but she did not fret in the slightest; she was having too much fun poking fun with her childish games along the small fish.

Gamagoori couldn't remove his smile as he watched her enjoy herself for once, gleefully acting childish without a care in the world, forgetting the hardships, and pain, and blood still soaked into her and the past she's trying to run from. She looked truly happy. She turned to him for a moment, smiling wider than he ever thought possible. She waved, and continued with her playful splashing, going a few steps deeper, the small waves hitting only a few inches closer

to her knees. She danced around in the shallows, sending water all around her in a breathtaking display of water and light, her smile making the display of childish fun even more rarer.

Gamagoori rose his communicator, and took a picture, the click giving him away and having her slam into his shoulders, reaching for the camera to delete the photo, but Gamagoori knew to keep it away and did so well enough to make Nui give up in her quest to delete it.

She sat down beside him as he stored the tablet away, making a pouty face before sighing once more, realizing the silliness of her fight, and laid her head against his shoulder.

"Just so you know, I didn't want to forget what you were doing. I wanted something to remember it by." Gamagoori told her a minute later, "I would have never given it out."

Nui's smile returned lightly. "I'm glad you did. I don't want to forget it either. Animals never came so close to me before! I thought I would never get close yet those little fish wouldn't leave me be!"

"You know... I'm glad to see you be truly happy for once."

Nui's face froze. She really was happy. Actually showing, feeling, and understanding happiness. She hadn't felt happy, the true emotion, in over ten years, and here she was being gleeful and happy and excited like a little girl over playing in the shallows of the bay and getting poked at by small fish. She didn't break out into a blush, embarrassed by her display or regretted trying to be happy, but simply smiled and reached out for Gamagoori's hand, the calloused palm taking her soft hand without pause.

"I'm happy I can actually feel this emotion again," Nui told him honestly, looking out into the bay and ocean. Her happiness slid away, however, when she saw the boat getting closer, "But I guess every moment has its close. The boat's getting closer."

Gamagoori's face fell, but he kept composed, standing up and bringing Nui to her feet. "You'll have to hide until I can show them you changed, okay?"

Nui felt the weight of the next few minutes come crashing on her. If he didn't convince them, she would be stranded here and forced to return to the Academy and Ragyo. She could end up dead here on the beach.

He could end up dead on the beach.

She let go of his hand and hugged into his chest, grabbing fistfuls of the thin shirt to ensure she would not let go of him. She didn't want to let go, or hide, or even think about the possibilities of what was to happen. She didn't want to risk losing him again.

He returned her desperate hug with one of gentle touch, the warmth of his humanity soaking into her again before he gently pushed her off him, cupping one cheek in his large hands. He left a feather-like kiss on her forehead before he whispered encouraging words, and turned toward the forest's edge near the beach.

"Hide in there, behind the trees. When they get here, and I have my chance, I'll signal you to come out, alright? I'm not leaving here without you. I promised that I would free you from Ragyo's clutches, and that will only be fulfilled once we leave here."

Nui nodded, unable to find the words strong enough to express herself. She was worried, anxious, yet somehow excited. She would, at long last, free of the bloody leash between Ragyo and herself.

She reached up on her toes, not bothering with tying down this impulse, and gently returned Gamagoori's kiss on his lips, and stepped back to admire the gentle pink rising to his cheeks. She smiled under the cover of her bangs, brushing the burning tears from her left eye, and walked toward her hiding spot, blending behind the large trees and plants with ease, kneeling down to improve her chances of staying hidden.

She rested on her knees for a few minutes, hearing only the sound of the bay and his gentle breathing and humming, picking up only snippets of his voice when he voiced his thoughts, but never understood what he said. The boat's engine grew louder as it finally arrived on the beach, the sound of boots on the beach making her still in horror. What if his plan didn't work, and they forced her to go back.

'No', she furiously thought, ' no, he'll convince them. He'll either convince them or I will convince them.'

Now she could hear everything clearly. Someone was also turning on Gamagoori's car, the sound of tires spinning in the sand signalling its slow move on to the boat.

"There you are, Gamagoori. We were planning to rescue you in a few days, but I guess you found your own way to freedom."

Lady Satsuki. Nui's spirits both fell and blossomed. On one hand, it meant that she could show the one authority figure among Nudist Beach that she had changed, that she was human, but however, it meant that if she failed or Lady Satsuki denied her, she had to stay and go back to REVOCS and Ragyo. She rubbed vigorously at her eyes, hoping that she wouldn't break down once the decision was made. She continued to listen in, her hope hovering in a dangerous grey zone.

"Ragyo had left temporarily to make way for plans in Europe. It was an open window, and I found it an endeavor to get this far, but I found my way to freedom."

"It's good to hear." Nui could hear Satsuki's happiness clearly in her voice. "You were not followed here, correct? Neither Ragyo nor Rei are alerted to your presence here?"

"They are not."

"And what of Nui?"

There it was. An opening. She peeked through the foliage and saw Gamagoori stall for a second, his shoulders turning briefly to her. He had to play this well, or reveal her now. Her hands twitched, a nervous tick to what was to happen. Would she have to run away, or stand up to Lady Satsuki? Defend Gamagoori with her life again?

"I hadn't seen her in a while. However, something happened when I saw her again."

"Something?" Disbelief slipped into her voice. Nui's nervousness rose, but she did not fear yet.

"She seemed... off, but it doesn't matter. Something else, on the other hand, does, Lady Satsuki."

"What, exactly, does matter at the moment besides your rescue?"

Her cue was right there. She adjusted her feet for a moment, and took a deep breath. It was time.

"... The person I brought with me."

He looked toward her, no exceptions, and she slowly rose to her feet, stepping out of the brush and foliage of the forest only to hear the crack of a gunshot, and pain spread like water across her left cheek. Blood, warm as Gamagoori's touch, trickled down her face as she raised a hand to gently touch what was obviously a bullet wound.

Someone shot her.

Someone had no restraint and shot her.

Someone shot her and missed their initial goal of killing her.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE!" Satsuki bellowed at the line of students in Nudist Beach gear behind her, a single gun smoking as the female student cursed, an angry snarl on her face, and lowered her gun. All the others held their weapons at ready, all pointing at her.

Gamagoori snarled out something to the student before stepping in front of her, one arm out in defense. Lady Satsuki's eyes were as cold as permafrost, but they gave no hint at her emotions at that moment.

"What is the meaning of this, Gamagoori?" Lady Satsuki's voice was hard as steel, deadly in every syllable she spoke. Nui could find no way to react, still hung on the wound in her right cheek. Someone SHOT her simply because she showed up.

"Let me explain before you go shooting her." Gamagoori asked. Nui hoped with quick worry that he could get her to listen.

"No explanation will fully make me understand how Nui is standing behind you and why you are protecting her."

Nui couldn't keep hold of her future she hoped for; at this rate, they were about ready to become target practice for the firing squad behind Lady Satsuki. Gamagoori stood his ground, raising his chin higher.

"Just let me explain, please, Lady Satsuki." He pleaded, lowering his arm, but refusing to move himself out-of-the-way of Nui, "She has good intentions for being here with me."

Lady Satsuki's face took a quick turn for disgusted, quickly gaining her composure before she let her personal opinions guide her astray. "Good intentions? Has she turned you against us, Gamagoori? This is Harime-"

"Nui. I don't take the name Harime anymore." Nui announced, snapping herself out of the delirious aftershock of the bullet hitting her, "I won't ever take that name given by *her*."

Gamagoori looked at her over his shoulder, a gentle look crossing his face before hardening and returning his gaze to his Lady. She stood silent in front of her small line of armed students, large black

trench coat swaying in the winds of the bay. The steel touch in her eyes had softened, but still lingered.

"Since when do you think on your own, Nui?" Satsuki's voice had softened as well, but kept its queenly force behind it. Nui stepped out from behind Gamagoori, eyeing the students cautiously as they shook. She took her place right beside him, uncertain if she would be absolutely safe even there.

"Since Gamagoori showed me what it was like to be human again." She answered honestly. The One Stars whispered nervously between one another, unbelieving in her words. Satsuki showed no reaction.

"Say I believe you, Nui. Show me one thing to prove you have freedom, one thing that you are no longer a puppet for my mother."

She could feel Gamagoori react, his hands shivering at the thought of truly convincing Lady Satsuki that Nui had changed. She smiled, getting everyone, including Lady Satsuki, to react. Her smile was not vicious, or insidious, without a single hint of concealed bemusement. It was a smile, a genuine gentle smile.

Lady Satsuki looked amused, but she sighed. "I can't trust just a smile, Harime."

Nui frowned, but quickly thought of how to earn her trust. She turned from them and walked toward Gamagoori's car, which was halfway on to the boat, stopped on the ramp once she revealed herself, reaching for the trunk right as the click of the gun's safeties went off. She turned to them, eyes widening in disbelief. Gamagoori stared them all down before Lady Satsuki's signaled them down. Nui opened the trunk, and pulled open her case, staring at the chipping purple Scissor Blade. More of the purple paint had chipped away, leaving more spots of red visible. She grabbed the handle and pulled it out, turning to Satsuki and then holding it in front of her in two hands, horizontal to her chest.

Lady Satsuki could obviously see the purple chip away, and her reaction was pure astonishment. Gamagoori smiled at Nui and stepped back as she walked back to Lady Satsuki, and held out the blade to her.

"It started returning to red when I finally fought against Ragyo, REVOCS, the Life Fibers... my inhumanity controlling me since I was six. Gamagoori showed me who I really was, what I was at my essence. He found my humanity for me when I could do nothing but hide it for my entire life. I owe him so much, and all I want is two things.

"To protect him, to make sure he is never subjugated under Ragyo and the Life Fibers, and never let him take what pain will come to me, and to get as far away from the pitiful excuse for a creator that beat me when I finally became human again."

Lady Satsuki reached out and ran her hands over the blade, flakes of purple falling to the ground. She looked at Nui, noticing the changes immediately. The change in her features, the lack of her eyepatch, the change in her demeanor, her hair undone from its twin drill style. The overall brighter look on Nui's face as she looked to the blade, and then to Gamagoori for the briefest moment before looking back at her.

The fact that she was willingly letting her touch the blade only ever seen from a distance, coated in the blood of innocents for many years.

"Please believe me, Satsuki," Nui murmured, "I don't want to go back to her. I don't want to be beaten, I don't want her hands on me anymore."

Satsuki's face changed. She looked content, a gentle smile curling her lips just enough to be noticed. "And Gamagoori did this? He showed you your humanity?"

"He did much more; he showed me how to be human again. He taught me, and led me when I stumbled. He came back for me when he had the chance to run away. He came back for the Life Fiber doll finally cut from her strings."

"You are no doll, Nui." Satsuki told her, then turning to her One-Stars, "Let her on. She is under my protection."

The one Stars dispersed on to the boats, some reluctantly returning their weapons to their holders, some looking at Nui with a murderous glint as they put the safeties back on, shoving them in their holsters. Nui expected nothing less but it still made her uncertain of getting on a cramped boat with them. Lady Satsuki put a hand on her arm, lowering the blade to Nui's side.

"I am not completely satisfied with this, but I am willing to hear what happened, and how he did this. You do not have my trust, but until I have the entire story, you are protected from harm," Satsuki told her, then pointing her gaze to Gamagoori, "I have no clue how you were able to do this but I would like to find out, but in a better location. Get on the boat, both of you. Grab your things from the car, and come away from this place. We'll talk about this when you are safe and settled."

Nui chuckle in relief, putting her hands together and resting them on her forehead, whispering her thanks that somehow they accomplished the near impossible. She turned and ran right into Gamagoori's readied arms, smiling with glee as he silently celebrated with her for a moment. Without her knowledge, Gamagoori went under Satsuki's suddenly heated eyes, watching them carefully before Nui stepped out of Gamagoori's embrace and jogged up to the trunk, pushing it open again and grabbed her bag and setting her blade back in its case.

As Nui grabbed their things, Satsuki pulled Gamagoori aside, her gaze pensive and intrigued.

"Obviously, what has happened between you is not so simple."

Gamagoori did not deny it. "No, it is not. I had not realized how deep this went between us until I was no longer under Mind Stitching control."

"Of Nui's?" Satsuki's voice almost betrayed her confusion.

Gamagoori shook his head. "Ragyo's. She found out about Nui's slow return to herself, and punished us both despite listening to Nui request... to spare me."

Satsuki turned and watched Nui reappear on the deck of the ship, the bags they had secured under the deck. She looked around for a moment, unsure of her next step before deciding to stare off the side of the railing.

"She wanted you spared?"

"She's made sure to protect me almost as long as I was captured. I fell under her hand, yes, but she soon found herself unable to accept what she did herself." Gamagoori chuckled for a moment, looking to Nui with admiration, "Without her, I would be dead. Without me, she would still be the doll Ragyo made her become. I'm finding myself drawn to her humanity very much."

Satsuki looked to him again. "And how drawn are you to her?"

Gamagoori went silent for a moment, unable to find the right words. How drawn into her was he? He caught Nui's eye as she took her own off the bay, smiling and waving at him before returning to her observations.

"Much more than I thought possible when she first showed kindness, but if you would like my honest opinion, Lady Satsuki... I have no intention of stopping what has already begun."

Satsuki stayed silent, but she found the ability to smile. He was being honest with her, and that honestly lead her to believe these wild

accusations. She gave Gamagoori a gentle pat on his shoulder, looking to Nui for a moment before walking toward the boat.

"As long as you do not let it interfere with our plans, our final goals."

"If you accept what has happened, she will be not just a big asset, but a perfect ally. This relationship between us won't hinder us a single second." Gamagoori announced, following Satsuki off the beach, "I will find a way to balance everything."

Nui knew that Satsuki wouldn't trust her, would not invest in her despite the obvious signs of her change to her side. Who would trust the girl who would rather slaughter then speak, giggle as she killed countless students, sacrificing so many for her and Ragyo's goals? She sighed gently and leaned her weight into her arms, relying on the railing to hold her up. The ocean wind blew her hair around behind her, the long blonde waves wrapping occasionally over her arm.

She was getting away. She was finally feeling freedom.

Gentle hands wove through her hair, and she smiled when she found Gamagoori gently gathering her hair into his hands, smoothing out rebellious strands that bunched up at his knuckles. She watched with budding curiousness over her shoulder as he gathered up every last strand of hair hanging down, and tying it up on her head in one long ponytail, hanging down in a think bundle to the small of her back.

"As much as I like the look of your hair down, it would be better if it was tied up." Gamagoori told her, running his hands through her hair for added measure, and took the spot to her left, looking out in to the ocean as the boat whistle bellowed, the boat's back-end secured closed, and the engines purred and pulled the boat from shore. A tarp had been pulled Gamagoori's car, which rested in the middle of the deck chained down and unmovable.

Nui reached up and ran her left hand through her new ponytail, feeling relief. Another change from the normality she wanted to be rid of. She smiled and rested herself against the railing again, watching the waves lap at the side of the boat as they roared away from the bay, and from the Academy.

"I'm free. I don't have to worry about her anymore. I'm free... finally." Nui murmured as she turned to him, watching the white fortress that was the Academy start to shrink. He looked the same way, and took her left hand, squeezing it as he stepped away from the rail, and lead Nui to his side as they faced the Academy and watched it slowly turn smaller on the horizon.

"I promised you freedom, I promised you a life without her. Now we work toward killing her, and reestablishing your footing."

Nui nodded, feeling better as her distance from Ragyo grew farther and farther apart. "You got me away from her. So... what do I do now? Do I..."

Gamagoori squeezed her hand again, working gently to intertwine their fingers. She looked down at their hands, then up to his face. She knew she had to be blushing but she didn't care.

"First, you settle into your new freedom, and get used to what Lady Satsuki and Nudist Beach does. Then we'll get ready to fight and battle alongside Lady Satsuki."

Nui grinned. "We? Lady Satsuki let you stay with me?"

"I'm the only one you trust, the only one close enough to stand with you. She had no choice, but... it did seem she was alright with it." Gamagoori told her, "Besides... someone who knows the rules should be teaching them to you."

Nui chuckled lightly, looking at up him despite her uneasiness with the idea of taking up more rules that she had no ideas about. He spotted her waver with uncanny ability, moving the hand he had

around hers and bringing it up to her face, cupping one cheek with a gentle warmth.

"Don't worry about anything right now, Nui. Let's just get away from Ragyo, and settled into Osaka and the Nudist Beach headquarters."

Nui closed her eyes briefly, blinking back tears with moderate success, the rest of her escaped tears brushed away. "You'll stay?"

There was no hesitation in Gamagoori's answer, his forehead resting against hers. Even though he answered in a whisper, she knew it carried the volume of his bellowing voice.

"I'll stay, no matter what."

The Mourning Period

Nui settled within the boat's confines shortly after seeing Honnouji disappear into the horizon. The small temporary bed was far off from the laps of luxury she was originally draped in, but she knew she wouldn't be back into the fancy plushy lifestyle until humanity secured its freedom and survival. Gamagoori had duties of his own with Lady Satsuki, and was gracious enough to find her a spot until they met up with Nudist Beach.

She bounced gently on the decent mattress. It was chilled by the ocean bouncing against the metal exterior of the boat, leading her to lay out on it, immediately calling it a good place to sleep. She sat up and stood on her feet, looking in the long bolted mirror on the other side of the room, seeing herself.

Her trademark pink dress, ribbons and bows still perfect. Her boots, shiny and gleaming. Her armbands, clear of any blemish. The clothing of a past horror-filled nightmare. She didn't want any of them anymore. She grabbed the bow on the top of her dress and ripped it off, throwing the offensive bow toward the trash.

It wasn't enough. She kicked off her boots and tossed them as well, followed by her armbands now in pieces. All that was left was her dress.

The same triple-tiered pink dress from so long ago. One that won praise from Satsuki and Rei when they first saw it years and years ago. The one handed to her personally by her father, telling her this dress was the one thing to always hold on to. The original never made it. Ragyo burned it in front of her, the last thing left from her father before he disappeared. Copies were made to make up for the loss.

It was a copy, a remake of the original item she treasured with her life, from her father. This was nothing but a fake made by Ragyo's

filthy hands to make sure Nui had no clue of the deception surrounding her.

She wanted to rip it to shreds, but she held a scrap of common sense. She had no other clothing at the moment. She simply slipped the dress over her head and placed it among the rest of her trash-bound clothing of old. She stood in the mirror again, looking up her flawless body. She wanted to see the scars of wars long fought, the scars of her mother's hands digging into her skin. She wanted the scars. She wanted the proof of her abuse. She wanted to know that she survived through the hell Ragyo put her through, that she could validate that she could survive torture like that.

She wanted something besides memories to live by. She wanted some proof of her brutal life. She tugged at her pure white lace bra, seeing the REVOCS insignia sewed into the inner left cup.

She wanted it to burn, and if she looked on the back of her panties, she'd bet she would want to burn them as well. She found herself frustrated with everything, and flopped on her bed, curling up around her blanket. She closed her eye without a care, and found no freedom in the black of her mind. She shrugged out of her spot, gripping the blanket to her chest. Soon she would be on the same boat as those who despise her, who want her dead.

She would be near Ryuuko.

She hoped she wouldn't be hurt too badly.

Gamagoori opened her door when the boat stopped moving, signalling their arrival to the Nudist Beach base. She had not dressed since discarding her dress, simply curling up and around her blanket in only her undergarments. He avoided staring at her body, kindly helping her up out of bed. He saw her pile of pink fabric around her trash, smiling sadly as he reached for her dress, noting the missing bow on the bodice. He did not question it, simply turning

his smile to her, gathering her in his arms in a silent recognition of her pain.

"Thank you." was all she could muster, but she knew he would accept it. He could easily see her plight and troubles. He held up instead a standard issue, from what she could tell of Nudist Beach, black undergarments tailored for the woman, and on further inspection found not a centimeter of Life Fibers in them. It was pure fabric. She was glad at least she could burn her old clothing sooner than later.

"Lady Satsuki passed on a pair to you. She figured you would want to throw it all away. Unfortunately, you won't be able to get rid of your dress until Iori is finished with something."

Nui paled for a moment. "She told someone I was coming?! What if the entire ship knows now, and Ryuuko is waiting for me-"

"She only messaged Iori concerning your clothing change," Gamagoori explained, grabbing her forearm, "He was astonished but vowed silence by my request. Do not forget that if anyone, especially Matoi, tries to hurt you at all, I will defend and protect you. You're safe."

Nui blinked away her tears, succeeding in pushing them back. She rubbed at her eyes anyway, keeping hold of her gift in her left hand as she thanked him again. With a multitudes of relief washing over her, she requested he turned to the door, and changed there on the spot. She had no qualms with him seeing her body. She flung her unwanted undergarments on to the bed as she slipped into her new panties, feeling relief to simply be wearing something not touched by Ragyo.

"Feel a little better, Nui?" Gamagoori asked, keeping his face trained to the door. Nui turned and poked him in the back, making him jump but he stayed turned toward the door.

"Yes," Nui answered with a surprising amount of gentleness, "You can turn around you know. I don't mind you looking."

Gamagoori was silent for a moment. "Have you finished changing?"

"Nope, but bras can be tricky to put on. Can you help me with the clasps?"

Nui walked to grab the bra as Gamagoori finally turned to face her. His face did a funny jump seeing her bare chest but he did not blush, or blabber about her dressing quickly. He looked for one moment, almost with a glint of admiration, and looked back into her eyes the next moment. She adjusted the bra on her before turning and letting Gamagoori pull the clasps together. With a final adjustment of the cups, she was set. She took her dress in her hands, feeling the soft fabric for a moment before pulling it over her head, only to get stuck until Gamagoori helped her pull it the rest of the way down.

Once she realized how close he was, she flushed for a moment before smiling. He smiled back and stepped back, allowing Nui her final adjustments before they walked out of the room and down the short hall and on to the deck of the small boat. Their things were being loaded on the large ship they had nestled within the long-standing grey base, the only exception being her Scissor Sword case which rested alongside Lady Satsuki.

Gamagoori squeezed her hand as her eyes wandered to the other deck of the boat, seeing several people up against the rails. She nevertheless moved closer to Gamagoori until she felt safely behind him. He chuckled for a moment, looking around him to see Nui using his size to hide. He understood her fear and allowed her to stay there, calling Lady Satsuki and alerting her of their arrival.

"Where's Nui?"

Nui popped her head out from behind him. "There are people on the boat. I don't want to be seen."

Satsuki looked up at the boat once and waved Nui over to her. With a heavy heart, Nui removed herself from her hiding spot and took the spot offered by Satsuki. Gamagoori stayed close, giving Nui the needed help to stay where she stood.

"They can't see us. We would look like blobs to them."

Nui nodded, looking up to the boat again, reaching out for Gamagoori's hand. The moment they would have to board the ship, she knew there was no going back. She had to face what waited for her there. Gamagoori helped quell her rising fear of going up, and mostly likely without him she would have never gone willingly when Satsuki lead them to the lift.

She was standing on her own when the lift opened again, the expansive deck of the Nudist Beach ship filling with students in their gear or no star uniforms, personnel loyal to the operation, and several family groups. She could see the Elite easily in the crowd, despite the lack of any other color other than light blue and black. She could spot several of the Two Star students lingering around as well, some labeled with crudely sewn stars on the pockets of their uniforms.

She edged herself closer to Gamagoori, unsure if walking out would be a good idea. However, she was left with no choice as Satsuki called them out. Cheers went up for a second before everyone's eyes were on her.

She could feel many of those stares turn to liquid fire, trying to burn their hatred into her. She tried to ignore her heart nearly beating out of her chest and walked behind Gamagoori as he returned to his fellow Elite for a moment, hurriedly explaining the situation as Nui faced the simmering crowd of students and Nudist Beach members all looking at her like predators cornering their prey. She held herself in place, looking around the entire front line, seeing more angry looks than intrigued ones. She looked over to Satsuki and Gamagoori, both seeing the reaction, and taking action. Gamagoori

walked over to Nui and gave some encouraging and calming words as Satsuki called their attention.

"Before any of you decide to do something impulsive and stupid, yes that is Harime Nui. By no means are you to harm her. No bullying, no physical harm, no mental or psychological harm, nothing. She is under my protection and my eyes. Gamagoori, who was able to get her to see Ragyo as the evil she was, will be guarding her as well. That should be warning enough not to act on impulse against her."

"I CALL BULLSHIT FOR THAT RULE!"

The crowd parted like the Red Sea as Ryuuko barreled down the path, her eyes burning in rage right at Nui. Gamagoori without hesitation moved in front of her, his face darkening as Ryuuko moved closer. No one dared tread near the trio, stunned as Ryuuko stopped right in front of Gamagoori.

"Move, Gamagoori. Now." Ryuuko's voice gave no stop to the complete anger that surrounded her. Gamagoori stood his ground as Nui peered around him, holding her own despite her worst fears coming alive before her.

"No."

"No?" Ryuuko laughed, "Did that pink frilly fucking *demon* sink her claws into you? You must be joking."

"She did nothing of the sort, and you are not to hurt her or else."

Ryuuko's lip curled. "Or else what, big man? Are you going to let her unleash you? Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Like Ragyo did to my father. She hasn't changed, you dumbshit! She's using your ass to kill us all. You've been played for a fool and a blind, mindless minion!"

"That's *enough*, Ryuuko." Satsuki snapped, her voice raising above everyone's hushed murmurs. Ryuuko snapped her head toward her

sister, rage spelled clear on her face. Satsuki approached with an equally annoyed look, but did not back down. She did not raise her hand, but rose her voice, making sure not a single ear missed her speech.

"You will have to face the facts and deal, Ryuuko, as I have. Do I trust her? No, I don't. Do I know all the facts behind this? No, only Gamagoori and Nui know. Do I want to risk the chance of her spying for our mother and risking every life on this ship and our chance to eliminate the Life Fibers?"

Satsuki paused, looking to Nui and Gamagoori for a moment. Nui slowly moved from behind him, leaning on his arm with an anxious and hurt expression. She knew Nui would not like to hear her true thoughts, but she had to announce them to assure her people that she was not making a foolish mistake.

"No, I don't," Satsuki continued, "But from what I saw on the beach we picked them up from, I can give everyone some peace of mind and say there is virtually no chance that she is under Ragyo's control anymore. Have any of you actually got the chance to look at her? I can even tell Nui has changed. What she told me drove what fears I had away. She didn't want to be near Ragyo anymore. She didn't want to be beaten, to be touched by her anymore. Does *that* sound familiar to you, Ryuuko?"

Ryuuko scowled and cringed, turning to Nui as Satsuki settled back a step, taking in a breath. Nui shivered, grabbing for Gamagoori's hand as she fought the memory backlash from the implied actions Ragyo forced upon them both.

"For now, I will let her on, and you will let her settle and adjust with her in peace without issues. She is not to be harmed in any way, physical, mental, psychological, anything. Believe me, Ryuuko, when I first saw her the first thing I wanted to do was hurt her, but as I have learned with my mistakes, I will give any asylum seeker a chance to prove themselves before I turn them away."

Ryuuko didn't obviously look happy with the rules, still staring with rage at Nui. Despite the glares still following her, Nui stood her ground, keeping to the neutral ground until she could figure out how to step in the right direction. She knew that starting with Ryuuko would end up in either her injured, Gamagoori injured, or a lot of One Stars dead. Ryuuko closed her eyes for a moment before opening them, giving Nui a parting fiery glare, and walked back through the crowd. Nui gave a sigh of relief of the lack of violence in their first meet.

"Thank goodness she didn't try to attack me." Nui murmured, shaking despite her relief getting out of their first of many altercations unharmed. Gamagoori squeezed her hand to reassure her of her safety, and smiled down at her as she calmed enough to respond back, taking back her hand and facing the crowd. Those in front of everyone took the time to look at her without the hateful gaze. She hoped that they could see the changes, but she could not force them to see her for what she is now. She realized for a moment that they could simply be staring at her scarred eye now uncovered. She never liked the scars, and immediately grew self-conscious at the idea, moving her bangs so that they covered her left eye.

"Now come on, Nui is not some roadside animal to poke and prod and stare at! Don't you all have jobs to do?!" Satsuki shouted over the crowd, making many jump and effectively scattering the large crowd. The Elite lingered on the deck alongside Mikisugi. Ryuuko, on the far edge of the crowd returning to work, gave Nui one last glance, and Nui could tell it was not all hate.

"So... Harime-"

Nui cut off Mikisugi immediately, stepping up to him. "Nui. Don't use Harime ever again."

"Picky much?" Nonon spat, looking at her funny.

"I won't keep anything that my mother had so kindly given me." Nui told them, sarcasm dripping for each word at the end. She looked to

Mikisugi, choosing to let the Elite simmer for a moment. "I'm sorry for cutting you off, Mikisugi. I just don't want to use that name anymore. I just want to be Nui, at least until the name of Kiryuuin is cleared of its black mark."

Satsuki couldn't help but smile, bringing Nui's smile a little larger. Gamagoori smiled as well, bringing the calm Nui needed to continue. She still shook, but she could hide it until formalities were finished.

"Alright then, Nui. Welcome to Nudist Beach! We'll get you out of the dress as quick as possible, and I will assume Gamagoori will find you a room close to him?"

"I can do that." Gamagoori agreed, stepping up. Nui knew he wouldn't be far away even if they ended up apart in terms of housing. If she needed him, he would come. If he needed her, she would come. The silent agreement passed between them as Nui shook Mikisugi's hand, feeling just a little better about the circumstances.

Shortly after solidifying her reasoning with the Elite Four, which went alright despite the sarcasm, burns, and hurtful words from Nonon. She knew no one would trust her, but at least they could understand some of the story. The rest would be explained in detail the next meeting once Nui had settled and figured out some of the ship's workings. Her room was in the upper floors among the better kept rooms. She was given room 8, four rooms from the five-room dead-end for the Elite Four. It was a similar setup from the boat that took her here, but with a bigger bed, a thicker comforter, a closet stocked with clothing she could choose from, and a place to hold her things.

She unpacked what little she brought, nestling her Scissor Sword beside her chest for now. She looked through her things, some older than she thought after closer inspection. Some were relics of her past before her turn to the dark side. One bag she grabbed contained what she could call an old stuffed animal, both its ears missing, a button eyes torn off, and several open rips. She had packed some sewing material, including thread, and put patching up the little animal on her list of things to do later.

Once she had everything in the pace she wanted, her next place to look was the closet. In it was two dresses, two sets of Nudist Beach utility belts with all different pockets, two pairs of Nudist Beach straps, two more bras, and a set of ribbons in a box on the bottom. A note was attached to the box, and she read it outloud to herself.

'Lady Satsuki requested you a new wardrobe, and it would have color but Nudist Beach is currently lacking in every color besides black at the moment. I did my best with what I remembered about you for the styles of the dresses. If you wear a dress, there are leggings and arm sleeves in the box as well. I hope you find these, at least for the moment, satisfactory.'

-Iori Shiro'

She smiled down at the paper. She vaguely remembered Iori. She remembered a small blond boy would visit Satsuki sometimes in their youth, and she could only tie the boy to the name. She set the note down and shrugged out of her dress, glad to be finally rid of the pink frilly fake cloth. She stuffed it into her trashcan and pulled a dress out.

It looked almost exactly like her old dress in terms of the cut of the bodice, but the skirt was layered in free-flowing fabric, easily sliding through her fingers as she felt it. The skirt was layered in two fabrics; one the soft liquid silk, the other a thin designed second skirt to add style and dimension. She slid into the dress and found it comfortable, chilled, and perfect. The hemline was just above her knees, and when she spun it fanned out all around her. She adjusted the bodice with a quick shimmy, and dove into the box of ribbons, accessories, and other things. She went with one of the arm sleeves, adjusting the cuff around her wrist so it wouldn't fall off. She redid her hair, choosing to stay with the one long ponytail, but wove a ribbon into the hairband.

As she stepped out of her room and turned to walk toward the Elite rooms, she ran into Ryuuko blocking her path. With her face in a neutral expression, Nui knew that whatever she did she had to do it

in favor of Ryuuko's friendship. As Ryuuko walked up to her, she noticed quickly that she wasn't wearing Senketsu.

"Nice dress."

Nui jumped unintentionally. She looked down at her dress. Admiring the dress couldn't be the only reason Ryuuko was here. Either way, Nui found her voice.

"T-thank you. Iori made it."

"I know. Listen, I need to talk to you."

Nui took a moment before answering. "About what?"

Ryuuko was in front of her quicker than she anticipated. She knew she would do it, but the speed she used had her scrambling back, falling on to her bottom from her inability to stay on her feet. Ryuuko hovered over her like a bird of prey, and Nui was just about as scared as a field mouse.

"About your so-called conversion to the good side. You're lying out your ass, and I'm going to get the truth or I will beat it out of you. It's the least you would get for the shit you've done to me, to all of us."

"It is the truth!" Nui shouted, "I don't want to be under Ragyo's thumb! I want her gone."

She didn't dodge Ryuuko's hand as it slapped her hard across her left cheek. Even though she knew it would happen, she still teared up as the stinging set in, her left hand cupping her now red cheek.

"Come on, then. Prove it to me! I want evidence, I want to see if I can get you angry so I can get your ass off of the ship because I will never trust you, you pink bitch."

Nui held herself up, getting to her feet and pushing Ryuuko back angrily, but her shove barely moved her. She wiped away her tears with a quick hand.

"I don't want to fight anymore! Can I just have some peace in my life for once?" she spat at Ryuuko, "I don't want to be your enemy! The last thing I wanted to happen was to be beaten up by you! Can you just take our sister's word for once and let go of the hatred toward me?"

"You are *not* a *sister* to me or to Satsuki." Ryuuko growled, baring her teeth.

Nui shook her head. "I share the same blood as you, Ryuuko. As much as it disgusts me, Ragyo is my mother. Not a soul sister, but a half-sister. I know you're disgusted and angry and want nothing more but to avenge your dad and I know you deserve that but I don't want to die before I see Ragyo dead and the Life Fibers gone."

Ryuuko went silent, looking at her with an unreadable expression. Nui shook her head, trying to stop the tears falling down her face. She didn't want to be enemies with her anymore. She didn't want to fear violence with her anymore.

"How then?"

"Huh?" Nui didn't catch what she said, caught by the softness in her voice.

"How did this happen? I want to know. As your original plaything, I want to know before anyone else." Ryuuko repeated, "I need to know, so if you're right I don't fuck up and hurt the wrong people."

"I never meant to make you a plaything." Nui blurted, "I didn't want to hurt you or anger you. Ragyo did."

Ryuuko waved a hand. "Hold the apologies till after. Just... let me know how Gamagoori helped break you free."

'*It's a start.*' Nui nodded. "Okay. I can tell you."

She rubbed the rest of her tears away as she stepped out on the deck of the ship after more than an hour explaining her story with Ryuuko. Although some of her tales resulted in her getting slapped (which she knew was the least Ryuuko could have done for her crimes), she felt she worked toward mending what relationship they had. Her cheek was still red from Ryuuko's slaps, stinging even in the cold dusk ocean air.

She felt the cold, but didn't really care if she got cold, leaning against the railing on the left side of the ship. The boat wouldn't be moving for a while, but she still had a view of the ocean. She could see the waves crash gently against the shore, catching the glittering sight of scrap metal ever so often from ongoing repairs to the ship.

She heard the heavy iron door open, and turned to meet the other night-time visitor with a smile. Gamagoori was in a pair of slacks and a tight shirt, the Nudist Beach emblem sewn on to both pieces.

"No utility belt?" she asked, drawing him toward her as she laughed, "I thought you would have gone all Nudist Beach for Satsuki."

"They allowed me this, at least." Gamagoori told her, "Nice dress."

Nui chuckled, pulling up the edges of the dress. "What they allowed me. It was this or the utility belt and the floaty straps which did not look comfortable or practical."

Gamagoori chuckled, taking the spot to her immediate right. "It can be comfortable, but it definitely is not practical. How did your time settling go?"

Nui rested heavily on the rails. "I ran into Ryuuko."

"And?" Gamagoori immediately prompted, turning Nui to him. She went to cover her still flame red cheek, but Gamagoori saw it, raising his own hand to cup the beaten cheek. "She did this."

Nui nodded, unable to admit it vocally. "She slapped me, but... she wasn't all angry at me."

"She hurt you, against Lady Satsuki's orders." Gamagoori growled, "And she obviously knew that before doing this."

"She wanted to know how I fought back! She just wanted to know how the one person she's been hunting for years suddenly changed direction. She let me explain what happened, every single detail. Some got her mad, angry, and she slapped me for them. I feel they were what I deserved."

Gamagoori's expression went from anger to sadness. "You don't deserve to be hit, ever."

"You don't know what I did, Gama. I... I don't want to remember them. They're horrible, disgusting, vile. And... they're things I did to you."

Nui let her tears come as Gamagoori froze. She brushed his hands off of her and jumped up on to the railing, sitting on top with her feet dangling over the deck as she waited for Gamagoori to respond. He looked shaken, and after a moment walked up to her, facing her with both hands on either side of her.

"You know that you never meant to do what you did." He murmured. She shook her head.

"But I did! Back then, I did! I forced you to-"

The same hand from before cupped one side of her face, his thumb rubbing soothing circles and brushing her tears away. He looked her in the eyes, level now that he sat on the railing, and rested his forehead on hers for a moment. The silence and comfort helped Nui calm down, her tears stopping as Gamagoori leaned away from her, a gentle smile on his lips.

"Will you allow me to do something to erase those memories?"

Nui let her gaze fall from his face and trail over the soft, calm grip on her hand. That single warm hand slowly climbed up to her elbow, holding her to ensure she didn't fall over the edge of the boat. He was going to do what she wanted, what she craved. She looked back up, nodding gently, her voice caught in her throat at his willingness to help her so intimately. She grabbed hold of the railings as he leaned in to her, letting her do the same until they were a breath away, their lips barely touching. With another nod and a whispered confirmation to continue, Gamagoori sealed the distance between them, and kissed her both gently and memorably, her thoughts zoning in on one thing: him. Her fears of her survival on the ship faded, her struggles with her memories dissipated into nothing. Her worry about the future dropped out of her mind.

His other hand cupped her right cheek, pulling her closer by just a few inches, but it made all the difference. She tilted her head as he tilted the other way, allowing them to get closer. Nui had always thought his body was as warm as the sun, but this one kiss with him had her burning in blazing flames, heat surging through every vein in her body. Even the dormant Life Fibers within her hummed with excitement as the kiss continued.

Once depleted of what air they had in their lungs, Gamagoori backed away, but kept close enough to feel Nui's bright and evident flush. He chuckled gently under his breath as he tugged her chin up and quickly kissed her again, lingering against her lips as he let her recover from the high she obviously floated on.

"Can I safely assume this helped?"

Nui's blank stare answered him, quickly followed by her moving the hand on her chin and hugging his shoulders, pulling him closer to her. Her head rested on a shoulder, leaning her face into his neck.

"It did much more than help." she murmured into his ear before settling back into his shoulder, smiling brightly. Gamagoori took two steps closer, his hands relocating around her, holding her up from the rail until she was on the deck, led by his hand until they were in

the middle of the expansive empty bow. With a twirl unexpectedly graceful, he spun her until she was flush to his chest.

She stepped back a step, grabbing a hand and raising it into the air. Gamagoori took hold of her waist as she grabbed the same arm, and led her back a step, starting their impromptu dance in the cold of the night, the stars their lights as they spun in the silence, the ocean and Nui's soft humming their soundtrack. Despite his size, Gamagoori had an air of grace as he spun Nui around twice, smiling when she caught her foot and stumbled into his chest. She brushed the mistake off easily, and let him lead her around the deck in a calming, touching dance.

Nui's smile never left as she spun and danced with him, her bare feet cooled at the touch of the deck. As the moon brightened, Gamagoori spun and dipped her as graceful as a professional, and stole one last kiss, this final passion filled with emotion. The kiss went on forever in Nui's eyes, feeling his hands on her back and his lips ever caressing hers; she felt all the worries of the uncertain future before her wash away. She knew at least she would have him with her.

As she was returned to her feet, her lips tingling from their last kiss, she couldn't help but question his motives for such a sweet gesture; her insecurity for things like this held no quarter despite her happiness.

"Just one more thing to help you calm down. These little things helped me in my life during rough times. I figured they would do the same for you."

Nui smiled, leaning into him as he took hold of her arms. "As usual, you figured correctly. I'm surprised I didn't fall with my two left feet."

Gamagoori chuckled. "Has the ever graceful fighter never danced before?"

"No," Nui admitted, smiling as she wrapped her arms around him again, "but I gave my first dance to someone very important to me."

Gamagoori blushed under her comment, but he did not push her away in embarrassment. He twirled her again, watching her black Nudist Beach dress spin with her like wings of onyx. Nui spun twice more before stepping away from him, dancing alone for a moment, the wind tossing both her clothing and her hair around. She stopped when Gamagoori stepped in, hugging her to his chest again.

"I'm glad you feel better now, Nui. If anything like that happens again, please. Please, come find me and let me help you. You don't have to struggle with it by yourself anymore."

Nui felt the pin pricks of her tears, but she let them come and fall, letting his warmth fill her again as she found comfort in his chest. The soft patter of his heart echoed in her ears, matching her heartbeat like puzzle pieces.

"It feels nice to have someone so close and sincere again. Thank you, Ira."

He walked with her back to her room, leaving her only after kissing her one more time and making sure she was okay. One kiss led to a few more short and sweet ones before Gamagoori called it a night and left with a murmur of good dreams and a gentle kiss to her forehead. She watched him walk down the hallway until she felt better, and walked into her room, turning on her lights before closing the heavy door.

Today held hardships she didn't want to face, but had so many warm and beautiful moments with her humanity. She chuckled gently, glad to know that Gamagoori still felt love toward her, enough to at least kiss her. She fake swooned as she chuckled louder, imagining what could happen if they ever went farther, landing in her bed.

"How sweet of a moment. I'm glad you found some poor sap to 'love' and 'comfort' you."

Nui shivered at the crisp, unmistakable voice cutting through her room. Cold swept through every cell, fear swallowing down her warmth and emotions. *'It can't be.'* She threw herself off her bed, standing ramrod straight, every synapse in her giving off warnings.

"To think after giving all my love to you, you push me away for some thick-headed, humanity-blinded idiot like him."

'It can't be, it can't be her. Don't look, don't look, don't listen.' Nui was frozen in place, her eyes as wide as china plates. Fear locked her legs and arms in place, her fingers twitching as the icy cold air wrapped around her, burning her wherever it settle.

"You may try to push me away, but I will not leave. Turn this way please, my child, and see for yourself the truth."

Nui found herself blinking back her tears, the greatest burdens falling down her face as her limbs moved against her will, turning to the darkest corner of the small room. Standing like a beacon in the black corner near her closet was the image of Ragyo, wearing her trademark white dress and holding what was obviously her discarded purple eyepatch.

"Nui..." Ragyo's voice was almost mournful, if not for the stinging betrayal biting the end of the word, "Why did you discard my gift to you? This was made by my own hands to help you recover from your wounds. I found it discarded like trash in the bay."

Nui could not say anything. *'This can't be real. She isn't here, she isn't here, she's far away.'* she thought furiously, her tears continuing to fall. Ragyo closed her hand around the patch and walked up to Nui, running a freezing hand over one cheek, putting the purple eyepatch back where it once was. It stuck to her face, cold and dripping wet. It smelled like saltwater and blood.

"It is good to see you again before I drag you back, screaming if it must happen that way."

Nui could feel her perfectly filed nails dig into her face, but all she could do was shiver and shake, crying as Ragyo ran her own bloodied hand down her face and neck, resting the hand over her heart. Nui flinched away from the hand, but Ragyo was determined to say there, keeping close no matter how much Nui wanted to get away. Ragyo traced the area of her heart with a steady nail.

"This weak pathetic thing will be mine. Do not ever think again that you are safe. I will find you, and bring you back and make you understand once and for all that you belong to me, and will die with me as the Life Fibers eat at this planet and swallow it whole. I do not care for such petty games with whimsical, ignorant, defiant children who see the opposite of what she is.

"Remember, my daughter, what I create is mine, and if they rebel I will not hesitate to break and abuse them until they are solely mine. If I must murder everything you love, and steal away everything you treasure, I will. You belong to me, to the Life Fibers. Your place is with me, under my hand, under my power, obeying my rules and orders. *Never forget your place, you ignorant, revolting, pathetic girl, or I will make you remember it.*"

Ragyo left with an evil sneer on her face once putting her point across to Nui, leaving the girl with her heart breaking. The blood was gone, and her eyepatch was nowhere to be seen. Instead of panicking with the sudden arrival and departure of her torturer, she fell to her knees sobbing and weeping.

She was no farther from Ragyo now than when they were escaping. Her safety was compromised. Gamagoori's life rested on her next steps. Her path was splitting three ways now, all of them dyed in the blood she didn't want to spill, or see spilled.

She didn't know what to do, but for now what she did was sob her fears into her hands, finding rest only when her crying pulled her

under the heaviness of her now overburdened consciousness.